

JASON AND THE DETECTIVES

The Case of the Missing Drone

By Karl Milde

Chapter 1:

With summer camp finally over, Jason had two weeks of freedom before the start of school. His two best friends, Matt O'Connor and Luke Garner, were scheduled to leave with their families two days from now on their long-awaited summer vacations. Jason had known Matt and Luke since third grade in Fairview, New York, where they used to live before moving to the same development in Somers, New York, called "Heritage Hills." Having settled in only recently, Jason's parents, Tom and Marjorie Brooks, chose not to take their usual family trip this summer but rather save their vacation time for the school holidays in late December.

Before Matt and Luke left to go their separate ways to parts unknown, Jason asked them to meet with him in their secret hideout—a small pavilion perched at the highest point in Heritage Hills on the so-called "West Hill." It wasn't much, just a place they had claimed as their own, but they could see the surrounding expanse from up here, where the houses looked like toys scattered across the green landscape. Two huge water tanks stood nearby, located somewhat below the pavilion and painted to blend in with the surroundings.

Jason and Matt sat on the bench inside the pavilion, talking together as a breeze stirred the air around them, when they saw their African American friend, Luke, lumbering up the steep slope near the water tanks. He was lugging something that looked like a small suitcase with handles on both sides.

"Oh, man," Luke shouted to them. "This thing is heavy."

Jason and Matt jumped up and ran down the hill to help.

“What’s in there?” Matt asked.

“You’ll see. Let’s get it up on the picnic table, and I’ll open it.”

Jason and Matt each grabbed hold of a handle, relieving Luke, who was more than happy to let them take over. The three boys walked the rest of the way up the hill, where Jason and Matt hoisted the case onto the table. Matt, the tallest of the three, did most of the final lifting.

They all stood around, staring at this unusual package: a gray plastic case with rounded corners and beveled edges. The name “Hi-Tech” was faintly embossed on the upper surface.

“You’ll never guess what’s in there,” Luke said, adding to the mystery and suspense.

“Open it. Open it,” Matt said excitedly.

Jason, slightly more pensive in nature, stood by and observed quietly.

Luke reached over and unsnapped the two clasps on each side that held the top and bottom halves of the case together. He slowly lifted the top half to reveal what was inside: a UAV—an unmanned aerial vehicle. It comprised a central body and four extended arms, all made of light blue plastic. Attached to the end of each arm was a small electric motor. In one separate pocket of the case were several black plastic propellers, in a second pocket was a small camera, in a third was a controller, and in a fourth were a battery charger and a spare battery.

Luke stepped back to let his friends get a good look.

“Oh, my God!” exclaimed Jason, excited in spite of himself. “A *drone*. And this one looks expensive.”

“It was,” Luke agreed. “It’s professional grade. When my dad buys me something, he gets the best,” he said proudly.

Matt couldn’t contain himself. “Can we *fly* it? I want to see it go!”

Jason swept his fingers across the velvety lining of the case. “Is the battery charged?”

“I charged the spare overnight,” Luke replied. “I can’t wait to try this thing myself. We can set it up right here on the table, then take it down the hill to the tennis court. Nobody was playing there when I went by.”

The three boys went to work, eagerly assembling the different parts of the drone after they had removed them from the case and placed them on the table. They installed the newly charged battery, connected propellers to the four motors and mounted the video camera underneath.

“There’s one more thing we need to do.” Luke entered a password on his smartphone to access the apps, then pressed an app for the drone. When the app loaded, he placed the phone sideways in a cradle on the controller and plugged a wire from the controller into the charging port of the phone.

“Now, we’re definitely ready to go,” Luke said, getting up from the table with the controller in hand. “Matt, you take the case with the remaining stuff and let Jason take the drone. We’ll go down to the tennis court and have some fun.”

The three boys, each carrying their share of the equipment, marched down the hill the short distance to the empty tennis court.

Jason set the drone on the green playing surface of the court, halfway between the surrounding fence and the tennis net, and stepped back. “How long can you fly it before you have to change the battery?” he asked Luke.

“The instructions say it can stay in the air for an hour. It depends on how you fly it, I suppose.”

When all was ready, Luke pressed a button on the controller to turn it on and did the same for the drone. The four motors came to life and began to spin the propellers at idle speed, too slow to provide lift for the three-pound aerial device.

With that, Luke pressed the throttle lever on the controller and the drone slowly began to rise. Jason watched with wonder as the humming craft reached the height of the tennis net and hovered calmly. Luke moved another joystick and the craft rotated in place until its camera was aimed directly at the three of them.

Jason stared at the camera's large glass eye, which stared inscrutably back at them. He stifled a shudder. The drone looked like a giant blue spider.

"This thing is really stable," Luke noted. "It has software to keep it flying level and to avoid obstacles." He maneuvered the craft with the joystick controls. It moved upward a short distance and floated sideways but stopped short of the fence. "If I let go of the controls it rights itself." Luke demonstrated by letting go of all the joysticks. The craft stopped moving and hovered calmly. "Any idiot can fly this," he said. "It's easy and fail-safe."

"Mind if I try it?" asked Jason.

Luke carefully handed him the controller. Jason briefly examined the control panel and, with his thumb, gently pressed the throttle joystick. The drone rose steadily until it reached the full height of the fence.

"Can I take it up higher?" he asked Luke.

"Yeah, go ahead."

Jason pressed the throttle forward again and the drone kept rising until it was higher than the nearby trees. All three boys watched the smartphone screen and saw a panoramic view of Heritage Hills. Jason slowly rotated the craft, causing its video camera to sweep the horizon.

As Jason guided the drone through the air, a familiar sensation settled over him. It was just like the spy plane he'd built the previous year, only this time, the drone's precision and advanced safety features far surpassed his earlier design.

"Wow!" shouted Matt. "Can I have a turn?"

Jason moved the throttle lever back and the drone descended, quickly at first and then slower and slower, until it finally settled quietly on the surface of the tennis court.

Feeling relieved at having brought the drone back safely, Jason gave the controller to Matt. He took it eagerly and examined its various buttons and joysticks.

"That one's the throttle," Luke explained. "Be really careful when you move it. That one rotates the drone around and moves it in any direction."

Matt moved the throttle lever a bit too far and too fast, and the drone shot up like a rocket. "Oops!" he said and throttled back. The drone descended much too quickly and looked like it would crash-land.

"Yikes!" screamed Luke as he watched in horror. "Go up. Go up. Don't let it crash!"

Even though the drone started to slow automatically before it hit the ground, Matt overreacted with the controls and the drone shot up again, this time to the height of the trees, where it hovered, waiting for further instructions.

Matt quickly gave the controller back to Luke. "Here quickly, you take it. I'm no good at this."

"You made a great save. But it takes some practice before you feel comfortable with it," Luke told him, meanwhile bringing the drone down to a safe landing on the tennis court surface.

"I don't feel comfortable. That's for sure. But I'd like to try it again after we get back from vacation."

“Any chance I could fly it while you guys are away?” Jason asked. “I’m going to be stuck here for two weeks with nothing to do.”

“I’m not sure,” Luke replied. “I’ll have to ask my dad about that. It’s okay with me, but he’s the one who bought and paid for it.”

“Oh, sure. But tell him I’ll be *really* careful.”

“I know you will. You and Matt are my best buddies. I’d be really surprised if I can’t persuade Dad to let you have it.”

Later that day, Luke called and told Jason that, as long as his parents approved, he could have the drone while Luke and his family were on vacation. “My dad insured it,” Luke said half-jokingly. “If you crash it, he’ll get his money back.”

Chapter 2:

After speaking with Luke on the phone, Jason asked his mother, Marjorie, to drive him over to Luke's condo unit.

"What on earth for? I thought you just met your friends at your hideout today. Isn't Luke getting ready to leave for vacation?"

"I need to pick up something quickly before he goes," Jason told her. He didn't tell her what it was, and she didn't ask.

"So where exactly does he live?"

Jason gave his mother Luke's unit number, explaining that he lived close by on the West Hill. The community of Heritage Hills encompassed two large hills, East Hill and West Hill, divided by a broad valley with a north-south road called Warren Street. The distance across the valley was so wide that all the condo units on the East Hill were some fifteen minutes away by car from the Brooks' home on the West Hill.

When they arrived at Luke's, Jason ran up to the front door and rang the bell. Luke opened it and handed Jason the loaded carrying case. "Take good care of her," Luke said with a chuckle, as though he were an elder passing down a family heirloom.

Jason nodded solemnly, but his excitement spread into the corners of his mouth. "I will. Thanks, man!" He bid his friend farewell and returned to the car with the prize that would occupy his every waking hour for the next two weeks.

"What's in the big box?" his mother asked after Jason placed it in the back seat and took his spot in the passenger seat of the car.

“Oh, just a toy Luke let me have for two weeks while he’s away.” Jason hoped his mother wouldn’t probe further. He wanted to get familiar with the “toy” and be ready to answer his parent’s questions before they said no. Luckily his mother was satisfied with his answer, at least for now.

When he arrived home, Jason grabbed the case from the back seat, ran to his room, and closed the door. He put the case on his bed, opened it, and took out the contents, placing each part, including the controller and the drone itself, on the soft bed covers. In a side pocket he found a small booklet of instructions that Luke had failed to mention. “I wonder if Luke even saw this...” He slipped it out and immediately started reading.

The booklet contained both text and illustrations explaining the assembly and operation of the drone. As he went through it from cover to cover, Jason examined both the drone and the controller to better understand what was being referenced in the instructions. He learned that the drone had eight optical sensors to detect objects all around and also below, and an onboard computer, responsive to the sensors, that controlled its motion to avoid collisions. The drone also had a barometer to determine its altitude and a GPS chip to tell it where it was at all times.

Jason further learned the drone had several modes of operation. In Assisted Flight Mode, the drone used its full sensing and GPS capability to avoid obstacles. In Sport Mode, designed for high-speed maneuvers, the drone turned off its optical sensing and could travel at speeds up to forty-five miles an hour to reach any selected place on the map. Finally, in a so-called “Attitude Mode,” the drone could be operated entirely manually, bypassing all of its protective measures.

When he was satisfied that he knew and understood all of the features and controls, Jason downloaded the drone app to his smartphone and spent time learning how it worked. He found,

for example, that by using his finger, he could draw a route on a map that appeared on his screen, and the drone would follow this path. There were so many available features and options that he couldn't remember them all. In the end, he decided to let them swim in his head overnight while he slept and to review them all again in the morning.

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The next day, Jason sat down at the breakfast table with his parents and his younger sister, Amy. As he started in on his bacon and eggs, he sensed no one was eating. He stopped and looked up. All eyes were fixed on him. "What?"

"That's what we want to know," Jason's mother said. "What did Luke give you yesterday? We're all curious."

"Oh!" Jason set down his fork and shrugged. "Okay, it was a drone," he replied innocently, trying to make his answer a nonevent. "It *is* a drone. It's in my room."

"A *drone*?" Amy asked, her eyes wide. "You have a drone? Are you going to fly it?"

Jason took a sip of his juice to give himself a small break from the questions. "Yes."

"When? Can I watch?"

His younger sister was making too much of his having a drone. "Sure. I'm going to take it up after breakfast," he answered as matter-of-factly as he could.

Amy stamped her feet and clapped her hands excitedly. "Yippee! Where are you going to fly it?"

"I was thinking of bringing it out to the golf course, away from all the trees."

"Are you sure you can do that?" Tom, his father, asked him, finally making his way into the conversation. "What about the golfers?"

"I'll be off to one side. On the side of the fairway."

“Still, you might get hit by a golf ball. And golfers might complain. Isn’t there an empty parking lot or something where you can go?”

“I could take you to the public parking lot at the top of the West Hill,” his mother, Marjorie, offered. “There are seldom any cars there, except on weekends when the golfers come out,” she added helpfully.

Jason thought about this for a moment. “I don’t know. I don’t want everyone here in Heritage to see me flying.”

“Why not?” his father asked.

“Because they might think I’m spying on them.”

“Which you *will be*,” Amy chimed in. “You’ll definitely be spying.”

She’s definitely not being helpful, Jason thought to himself.

“No, he won’t. I won’t allow it,” his father said.

“How about out back, beyond the patio?” Amy asked. “Why not fly it from there?”

“I’ve thought about that. There are too many trees,” Jason answered. “After the drone takes off and it’s above the trees, I won’t be able to see it. What happens then when it’s time to land? The tops of the trees will all look the same from up there.”

“You mean you’ll have to keep it in sight when you fly it? That sucks.” Amy said.

“Sucks how? What’s wrong with that?” Jason asked, getting annoyed now with his sister’s interfering comments.

“You won’t be able to spy on people.”

“Now wait just a minute,” their father protested. “I just told you. You’re not spying. If you do, I’ll ground you.”

Jason slumped against his chair and blew out a breath. “I guess we should go to the parking lot.”

“Well, I wish I could watch, but I have to go to work. Mom’s in charge now, but let me know how it goes.” His father got up from the table and took his leave.

“When can Jason fly it?” Amy asked when he had left.

Jason and Amy both looked at their mother inquiringly.

“Help me clean the dishes, and we can go right away,” she said.

Jason sprang up from the table, almost knocking over his chair, and joined Amy at the sink. They quickly cleared the dishes, rinsing and placing them in the dishwasher, all while Jason’s mind buzzed with anticipation, imagining the drone soaring through the sky.

Their mother looked on and nodded with a smile when they were done.

“Amy, help me carry the drone stuff to the car,” Jason shouted as he ran to his room with Amy in tow.

Chapter 3:

Jason and Amy's mother parked in a far corner of the restaurant's empty parking lot, and they all climbed out of the car. Jason held the controller while Amy took hold of the drone. "Careful!" Jason cautioned his sister as she carried it and set it down on the tarmac, a safe distance away from the car and the edge of the lot. Meanwhile, Marjorie took three folding chairs from the trunk of the car and set them down close by.

"I won't need a chair, Mom," Jason told her, his voice brimming with enthusiasm. "I'm going to stand while I fly it."

"The chair's here if you need it," she said.

Jason unlocked his smartphone with his passcode, plugged in the wire at the bottom, and inserted the phone sideways in the cradle on the controller. He selected the drone app and waited until it loaded and painted the map on the screen. A red dot on the map showed their exact location.

He pressed buttons on both the controller and the drone to turn them on. The drone's propellers began whirling at an idling speed. He pressed the throttle lever forward, causing the propellers to spin faster. The drone slowly lifted itself from the tarmac, then shot upward with increasing speed.

Amy clapped her hands with excitement. "Hooray!"

Their mom sat nearby in one of the chairs, watching.

Under Jason's careful control, the drone rose to above tree level. Its camera scanned the horizon, then dipped directly down. On Jason's screen, he and his family appeared as tiny specks on the gray surface of the tarmac.

“Let me see. Let me see.” Amy pressed next to Jason and peered closely at the smartphone screen. “Everything’s awfully small. Couldn’t we use my iPad? My screen is much bigger.”

“I don’t know,” Jason replied honestly. “We could try. You’d have to download the app.”

“When we get home,” Amy replied, now looking at the sky and watching the drone move overhead.

Jason flew it in the direction of their condo unit, watching the screen. He wanted to see if he could identify their unit from the air. When he thought he saw the building, he maneuvered the drone closer and angled the camera for a better view. “There it *is*,” he said. “That’s where we live!”

“You’d better come back pretty soon,” Amy warned. “Before you run out of gas.”

“We have a whole hour. There’s still plenty of charge left to check out the East Hill before I land.” Jason brought the drone back overhead, then flew it in an easterly direction across the valley and continued until it hovered over the highest point on the East Hill. While sweeping the beautiful landscape with the camera aimed slightly downward, he noticed three people walking along a main road. Using the camera controls, he zoomed in on them to get a better look, but they were apparently unaware of the drone and didn’t look up.

“They don’t hear the drone. They don’t even know we’re looking at them.” Amy gave her mother an inquisitive look, as if to ask if such spying were permitted. Her mom said nothing.

The tranquil scene shifted when a copper-colored SUV came along the road at a fast clip, barreling toward the pedestrians. Two of them jumped the curb to the safety of the grass, and the third, who was walking more or less in the middle of the road, ran to the other side. Through the iPhone speaker, above the hiss of the drone propellers, Jason and Amy heard the car’s horn

honking even though the people were clearly already out of the way. The driver's recklessness sent a shiver of concern through Jason, but the pedestrians soon resumed their path on the road, shaking their heads and communicating inaudibly. Jason angled the camera lens to locate the car again, easily spotted because of its color, speeding down the road.

He guided the drone back to the West Hill and brought it in for a landing at the exact same spot from where it took off. "How cool is *that*?" he remarked, beaming from cheek to cheek.

His mother and Amy both agreed, although his mother hadn't witnessed the footage he'd just seen—otherwise, she might have differed. Still, Jason was proud of bringing the drone back safely.

They loaded the drone and the controller back in the car, and Marjorie drove them home. On the way, she asked Jason, "How long can you keep this...this thing?"

"About two weeks," Jason answered. "When Luke comes back home, he'll want it back."

Chapter 4:

Jason spent the entire next week perfecting his flying skills, repeatedly launching the drone from the patio at the rear of their condo unit. From the first flight with his mother and Amy, launched from the restaurant parking lot at the top of the West Hill, he discovered he could easily locate any residence within the Heritage Hills complex. He made repeated trips from his patio to different parts of Heritage Hills until he became familiar with the entire area and felt comfortable navigating.

“Practice makes perfect,” he kept telling himself as he maneuvered the drone and realized, time after time, it didn’t go where he wanted and didn’t do what he wanted it to. At first, he only flew with the optical sensors activated to protect against the drone colliding with either obstacles or with the ground. Later, as he became more skilled, he placed the drone in Attitude Mode, where he could fly it entirely manually, using the joysticks to control its every move. He felt his confidence building with each practice as his skills improved.

From the start, he took Amy up on her suggestion to use her iPad rather than his smartphone, because iPad images from the drone’s video camera were much larger. Creating a holder for the iPad took some doing, but Jason’s skills as a bicycle mechanic, honed over the past several years, came in handy once again. He fashioned the holder from spare hardware from the garage and connected it to the controller in place of the smartphone gripper.

In return for using her iPad, Jason let Amy fly the drone for five or ten minutes whenever she asked. Eventually she too became an experienced pilot, but Jason had the advantage of spending much more time at the controls. Also, he insisted that Amy fly the drone only in the

basic Assisted Flight Mode. He trusted only himself to fly the drone entirely manually, without the full protection of all the failsafe measures.

When reading the manual for the second or third time, Jason came across a feature he thought might just come in handy. Pressing a button on the controller caused it to record the video stream received from the drone. Amy had told him she could record images too on her iPad, but he had never learned to use that feature.

By the end of the week, Jason was ready to take his piloting skills to the next level. Rather than bringing the drone outside as he had previously done every morning, he decided to try and fly it manually inside. With the drone placed on the middle of his bed, he pushed the throttle lever forward ever so gently and watched as it lifted itself up, inch by inch. When the drone was about a foot off the bed, he turned it so the camera was aimed at the open doorway and moved it forward out into the hall.

“Watch out. Here it *comes*,” he shouted to no one in particular, something like a golfer shouting “Fore!” after hitting a golf ball down the fairway.

Jason piloted the drone into the dining area at shoulder height and from there into the kitchen. Forewarned, Jason’s mother stepped out of the way to allow it to float by. On the screen, Jason saw her stifle a smile.

Jason felt quite comfortable controlling the drone as he followed behind it, maneuvering it around the kitchen and then out through the other kitchen doorway into the living area. He stopped short of the door after the drone passed through, remaining in the kitchen and piloting the craft by watching the screen.

Imagining he was inside the drone, he flew around the living room. He flew close to the mantelpiece over the fireplace and did an about-face. Aiming the camera downward, he saw the

cocktail table right in front of him. He floated the device forward a few feet until it was directly over the table, then sank slowly down and landed on its polished surface.

“Great landing!” Amy shouted from somewhere while clapping.

Being in the kitchen, he was unable to see her, and because he’d landed, he couldn’t swing the drone around and have the camera sweep the room. To look for her, he lifted the drone from the table and spun it around, but she was nowhere to be seen. He moved forward in the direction of the dining area and was just about to land on the dining room table when he heard a loud shout from behind.

“*Boo.*” It was Amy’s voice.

Startled, he turned his head to look at her and, at the same time, heard a *crash*. He ran into the dining area just in time to see the craft slither across the dining room table, bang into the hutch, and drop to the floor with a dull *thunk*. Pieces of a propeller floated downward from the chandelier.

Jason’s mother heard the noise and came running.

Jason tenderly picked up the device and examined it. “Thank God.” As far as he could tell, only the propellers were broken, and the carrying case included quite a number of spares.

Jason looked at both Amy and his mother, who stared at him with worried eyes. Somewhat embarrassed by his failure to pay attention, all he could say was, “I can easily fix it.”

“Thank goodness,” Marjorie said. “No more flying this...*thing* indoors. Take it outside.”

Chapter 5:

What's it like to fly a drone? *This is Jason talking. When I first started, I had to watch my every move. I had to concentrate, like you do when you do your homework for school. But as I practiced and practiced over the past week, it became second nature to me and increasingly more fun. In the end I was, well, flying. Really flying. I could go up and down, this way and that, and look all around by just thinking about it. The feeling's hard to describe but I've found the right word for it. Exhilarating. It's a big word, I know, but do yourself a favor and look it up.*

When I'm flying the drone, I imagine myself inside it, looking out through the camera lens. I'm in there. When you see this thing, that's me. I'm in the drone.

I have one week to go before I have to give the drone back to Luke. Only one week to fly anywhere and everywhere.

I figure I'd better make the most of it and get cracking. But where should I go, and what should I do when I get there?

By the way, though, there is one small problem: I have to come back home every hour. I can switch out the battery for a charged one, but it takes four hours to charge one fully. This means I can take only three trips a day: two in the morning using both batteries that I've recharged overnight, and one trip in the afternoon, after the first battery I use in the morning has had time to recharge.

Three trips a day. That's all I can do.

This morning, I'm going to float as high as I dare to go and look around. Here I go...up, up, up! I'm starting to feel a bit queasy. I don't want to look down. It's like I'm really aboard this drone, and believe me: I hate heights.

I look straight out and can see farther and farther away as I go higher. I'm looking north right now. There's a ridge along the border between Westchester and Putnam counties. At first, the ridge is higher than I am, and all I can see is a wall of green trees. As I rise above those trees, I see power lines running east and west along the top of the ridge. I can't tell where they are coming from or where they're going, but I know enough to stay clear of them.

I decide to fly over the power lines into the valley on the other side. I see a little white church with a lawn around it. Dipping down and looking closer, I find the lawn is dotted with gravestones. A cemetery. Some of the gravestones are so old the names have eroded and are barely readable.

I follow a road, like a car, heading west. There are houses on both sides—some old and some fairly new. The road bends to the right, where a huge white house sits next to a pond. The dirt road on the opposite side to the left looks intriguing, so I follow it, heading south. I'm above the trees. I see a parking lot and...something weird. I dip down and I can see and hear people firing guns.

This must be a shooting range. I've heard of them, but I've never seen one. I go back up and now I can see this one from above. I must say, it looks sinister. Why would someone practice firing a gun except to better shoot at a helpless animal, or worse?

I don't want to think about it, so I'd better leave. Anyway, my hour of flying will be up pretty soon and I should go home. But then something catches my eye. A man is walking toward a car in the parking lot—a copper-colored SUV, the same as the one I saw earlier in Heritage Hills. I'd like to wait and see where that car goes, but I need to return.

Rising up, I head south over the power lines and across the ridge. I use Sport Mode so I can fly at high speed, and within a minute or two I'm back in Heritage Hills. Looking around, I find my home and come in for a landing in the backyard.

I quickly replace the battery on the drone with a fully charged one, and I'm on my way again. I rise above the trees and head over to Warren Street, a north-south road that crosses the ridge between Westchester and Putnam Counties. If the copper-colored car were returning to Heritage Hills, it would probably take that road, and yes! There it is. Peering down, I see the SUV driving south on that road.

I stay far up, out of sight and too high to be heard, and watch the car. I follow it from a distance of a thousand feet and see it wend its way through the spiderweb of roads in Heritage Hills to one of the condo units. I know where the guy lives now—the guy with a gun.

Chapter 6:

The next day, with both batteries recharged, Jason readied himself to go again. This time he flew directly north, over the ridge and the power lines, to view the shooting range. He was tempted to first fly over the condo unit with the copper-colored SUV, but figured there was little or no chance he'd see the man who lived there. He could stay in the air for only an hour, so he couldn't exactly conduct a stakeout at the unit.

I press the "record" button on the controller to capture the video stream just in case there is something worth reviewing later, and within five minutes I'm flying over the shooting range. Looking down, I see three or four guys firing their weapons. I can hear them too. Pop, pop. Muffled sounds at random intervals. I pass over the range and see the parking lot up ahead. I swoop down to get a closer look at the cars and there's a happy surprise waiting for me. The copper-colored SUV is parked there again. One of the guys on the firing line is that guy who was practicing shooting there yesterday.

I don't know why I'm so interested in him. Maybe it's because he rudely honked his horn at those pedestrians to shoo them out of the way. Maybe it's because I can't even imagine why someone living in Heritage Hills would own a firearm.

I don't know what I'm looking for, but I must admit I'm curious. More so than I should be, I suppose, but my instincts as an amateur detective are kicking in.

The parking lot is nothing more than a clearing in the woods on one side of the dirt access road. Four cars are parked there, including the copper SUV. My drone can take me wherever I want to go, and right now I want to take a good look at that car. I float down behind the row of cars and hover behind the copper-colored one. While piloting with one hand, I'm able

to jot down the license plate number with the other. I fly as close as I can to the rear of the car to take a look at what's inside. Sunlight reflecting off the rear window makes it difficult to see, but because I've been practicing piloting this drone for more than a week, I can come within inches of the back window without touching it.

Inside the trunk space of this SUV are a number of black objects. A white puffy cloud above floats by and blocks the direct sunlight, reducing the glare from the back window, and it becomes clear that these objects are guns. Two long guns and a flat black case, which I'll bet dollars to donuts contains a handgun.

"Hey!"

I hear a shout and look toward the firing range. A man is running toward me with a rifle tucked under his right arm.

"Stop right there!"

My heart rate spikes. It's time to leave. I press the throttle lever forward as far as it will go and shoot up suddenly like an elevator in a New York City skyscraper. Looking down, I see the man aiming his gun at me. Before he can fire, I use the other joystick to move sideways as I go. I did so just in time because the bullet missed. If I'd stayed in his sights a second longer, he would have knocked me out of the sky.

It takes me a few seconds to realize I'm not really in the drone. I'm safe at home, controlling it from a distance, but it sure feels like I was shot at, and I don't like that one bit.

I race home to get a fresh battery. I switch batteries and head out again, this time to the home of the guy with the gun. I expect him to return soon, and when he does, I want to be ready.

His unit is on a side hill, built into the steep landscape of the East Hill at Heritage. Like many of the units there, it has a partially flat roof. I say "partially" because the roof is slanted

on both the front and rear. Only the very top is flat. This gives me a perfect place to land—and to hide where people seldom look.

I fly over there at an altitude of a thousand feet, almost too high in the air for anyone to see me from the ground and, when I'm directly over the gun guy's unit, I come straight down in a flash and perch on the roof. My camera was looking downward at first, but as I came in for the landing, I changed the camera angle to look out toward the other units nearby. Now that I've landed, I can see whoever drives in and out of the housing cluster.

I'm just in time too, because I see the copper-colored SUV drive into the cluster at a fast clip and disappear into the garage below. Here I sit in the catbird seat, watching and waiting for something to happen.

Chapter 7:

I don't know what I expect to happen, but I think something will. If I sit here long enough with the video camera on, I think our gun guy will make some kind of a move that'll reveal his intentions. But I see nothing of the sort.

After about twenty minutes, I see a garage door across the way rise to reveal a woman and a pretty dark-haired girl about my age climbing into a large silver SUV. The red brake lights illuminate first, followed by the white backup lights. The car backs out onto the driveway, turns and leaves the area while the garage door slowly descends and closes. That is the only movement I see in the camera's video stream. The rest of the time, the front of the gun guy's unit, as seen from my rooftop perch, is still.

I know the man is at home in the building below me, but short of flying in a window and looking around inside, there is nothing I can do. I feel panic welling within and make a quick decision to leave. As I'm about to press the throttle lever forward to lift myself off the roof, the still image on my screen disappears.

Jason first thought it must be a technical glitch. His heart pounded as he turned the controller off and back on, but the screen remained dark. Clearly the controller was no longer receiving a video signal from the drone. Without that, he couldn't fly the drone home. Next, he figured the drone battery had died. Maybe it wasn't fully recharged. Maybe it was unable to hold a charge for a full hour. The panic gnawed at him. There appeared nothing he could do but throw myself at the mercy of the gun guy: to ask his permission to retrieve the drone. The idea twisted in his gut. Would the man help – or hurt – a twelve-year-old kid?

* * * *

After Jason told his mother he'd flown the drone over to the East Hill and had "run out of gas," he asked if she could take him over there to retrieve it. Amy looked on with a sad face.

"Do you know where it is?" she asked him.

"Yes, I think so. I think..." Jason hesitated, wondering what his mother might say about possible invasion of privacy. "I think it landed on someone's roof."

"Oh really? Well, how do you expect to get it then?"

"I'll ask the guy who lives there," he said casually, even though his heart was hammering. "We'll need his permission to put up a ladder. Then maybe we can get some help from the Maintenance Department of Heritage Hills."

"I think we should wait until your father gets home."

"But, *Mom*," Jason pleaded. "That drone's very expensive and it's not even mine. We need to go there right away."

Jason's mother finally agreed. Relief swept through him. *Get the drone and get out*, he thought as he rushed to his room and grabbed the controller and the other battery, partially recharged, before joining Amy in the car his mother had backed out of the garage. She drove them over to the East Hill, and Jason told her where to go. Should he tell her the man who lived there owned a gun? *Correction: guns*, he reminded himself. He shook the thought away and pointed to a street for her to take. He had seen the area from high in the air more than once and, after taking a few false turns, he was able to locate the unit.

As they drove into the cluster, Jason stared up at the roof. He knew exactly where the drone should have been, close to the roofline in front of the unit, but it was *gone*.

Chapter 8:

“It’s not there,” Jason said, his voice tight as he fumbled with the door handle. He exited the car quickly, panic spreading through his chest, although he tried not to show it. Amy got out too, while their mom stayed in the driver’s seat and opened her window.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” their mom asked, staring through the windshield at the flat roof.

“I’m sure, Mom.” By now, Jason was sure the disappointment was written all over his face.

“Maybe it fell off. Look on the ground,” she said.

Jason walked over and examined the area in front of the condo unit. No drone was in sight, but he did see two indentations in the soft grass, indicating that a ladder had been placed there recently.

“Nothing,” he said, dejected. “This guy got it down. He has it.”

“That’s good, isn’t it? Just knock on his door and ask him for it.”

Instead of doing that, Jason told Amy to give him the controller.

“What are you going to do with it?” she asked, grabbing it from the back seat and handing it over.

“I’m going to try and retrieve the video I made of this last flight. If the guy didn’t turn the drone off, maybe I can download it to this controller.”

“You sure you can do that? If you recorded a video, it’s on the flash drive you plugged into the drone. You’re supposed to unplug the drive from the drone and plug it into your computer.”

“I know. I know. But I figure there may be some way to work around it.”

“Why didn’t you ask me? I’ve got the video *right here*.” Amy took out her iPad from the back seat and tapped the screen several times. A somewhat fuzzy video showing the last flight started to play.

“Wha...? How’d you do that?”

“I wanted to watch your flight when you were finished, so I started recording the video stream just before you started flying. Turns out the iPad can capture a whole hour if you use the low-res setting.”

Jason was stunned. “Well, I’ll be...” And after a beat, the realization hit him and his expression shifted. “Wait a minute, Amy. I’m not sure that’s a such good idea.”

“I wasn’t going to tell you. Thought it might make you mad at me.”

“Mad at you? For what?”

“For spying on you. I wanted to see what you were up to.”

“Really? You were worried about that? I’ve got nothing to hide.”

“You say that now. Wait ‘til you have a girlfriend or something.”

“That’s never going to happen,” Jason answered without hesitation.

Chapter 9:

Jason dreaded telling Luke he'd lost the drone. Delivering that blow would be one of the most difficult things he'd faced in his long twelve years of age.

That evening he sat stone silent with his family at the dinner table. His mother was the first to notice. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her elbow his father, then nod at his sister. They all stopped eating and stared in his direction.

Jason's father cleared his throat. "What's the matter, son? You're not eating or talking. Is there anything we can help you with?"

Jason glanced at his mom, who knew full well what was bothering him, but clearly she wanted him to share the details on his own.

"I'm worried about what Luke will say. He's going to be so mad at me we won't even be friends anymore," Jason replied in almost a whine.

"We'll help you get the drone back," his dad assured him. "And if we can't, we'll buy you a new one to give to Luke."

Guilt tugged at him. "He said his drone was expensive. I can't ask you to do that. Anyway, he said his father had it insured." But even that felt like a complicated solution.

"Getting the insurance company to pay might be difficult. It depends upon what he insured the drone for. This would come under the category 'lost or stolen,' but he might have only covered it for repair after a crash or something."

"Or something? Something like being left on a roof?"

"I'm not sure. It all depends on the fine print in his insurance policy," his dad answered.

“Maybe we should just work on getting the drone back,” Jason’s mom said firmly. “Let’s all go over there after dinner and knock on the man’s door again.”

Jason felt a little better after this conversation and ate his entire meal. This was something that, in his normal desire to go back to his room, he rarely did.

A half hour later, they all piled into the family car and drove to the East Hill. Jason’s mother was at the wheel since she had driven the route previously. A few minutes later she pulled into the cluster of homes and stopped outside the unit where the drone was last seen. Jason was sure it was taken by the man who lived in that unit, the man he called “the gun guy.”

Jason and his father exited the car and walked together up to the front door. Jason pressed the doorbell button and could hear the *ding* inside. Silence followed, but then, after waiting a moment, he heard footsteps.

The main door opened a crack and a man peered out through the glass of the storm door. “What do you want?” he asked.

As they had discussed in the car coming over, Jason would do the talking at first. “I’ve come about my missing drone. I landed it on your roof yesterday by accident, and now it’s not there. Did you take it down?”

“What’s your name?” the man asked.

Jason told him, asked his father to say ‘hello,’ then blurted out, “I’d like to have my drone back.”

“I don’t know anything about it.”

“There are marks on the lawn, right there in front,” he said, pointing to the spot, “where you used a ladder to climb up and get it.”

“Are you calling me a liar?”

“No, I just...”

Jason’s father stepped up. “What is your name, sir?” he asked respectfully.

“What’s it to you?”

“We know your unit number. We can easily find out.”

“What is *your* name?”

“*George Clooney*. What does that matter? You heard the boy. He wants his drone back.”

The man snarled, “Idiot,” and slammed the door closed in Jason’s and his father’s faces.

Jason looked at his dad, slightly embarrassed at the difficulties he had caused his family by landing his drone on this man’s roof. “The man’s lying, Dad. He took it and he won’t give it back.”

“I know he did,” his dad said. “The question is what to do about it. I’m thinking we should go to the security office and tell them all about this.”

“They’ll say it’s my fault for landing the drone on his roof.”

“I doubt that. The airspace around here is free for everyone and, come to think of it, the man doesn’t even own that roof. It’s the condo’s property.”

“Doesn’t own the roof?”

“No, he owns what’s *inside* the outer walls of this place. I’m not sure he even owns the layer of insulation. If the roof leaks, the condominium has to fix it. Not the guy who lives here.”

“That’s weird, but I guess it means I’m okay. At least I won’t be going to jail,” Jason said ruefully.

“Don’t worry,” his dad assured him as they walked together back to the car. “They don’t put kids in jail. If they did,” he added jokingly, “the jails would be full of young boys like you because of the pranks they pull.”

“What I did was *not* a prank, Dad,” Jason protested. “I was really trying to...um, spy on this guy. He *shot* at the drone with his *rifle*!”

Chapter 10:

After returning to the car, they drove right over to the security office at the Activities Center. Jason drummed his fingers nervously on the seat. Two white SUVs marked “Security” in bold letters on the side were parked in the area allotted to security vehicles. Jason and his dad got out of the car and walked over to the office, which was near the entrance to the exercise room. It was agreed that Jason would do the talking.

Jason stepped up to the window and caught his reflection in the glass—tense, anxious. Steeling himself, he spoke to the man at the reception desk. “Can you help me?”

“I’ll try,” answered the uniformed security officer, who sat facing him and a computer screen below the window. The man, in his mid-thirties, Jason surmised, had an impressive physique, made even more imposing by his gun belt. He looked up at Jason with a somewhat bored expression. “What can I do for you?”

“A man stole my drone and won’t give it back.”

“Your drone? You have a drone?”

“Yeah. It’s not exactly mine. I borrowed it from a friend, and...”

“I assume you know the drone has to be registered with the FAA.”

“No, I didn’t know,” Jason responded. “I’ll tell my friend and make sure he does it. But here’s my problem: I landed my drone on one of the buildings, and I couldn’t fly it home. I thought it was a dead battery, but I wasn’t sure. Anyway, by the time I went over to get it, the guy who lives there climbed up to the roof and grabbed it. And he won’t give it back.”

“He admits he took it?”

“He said he knows nothing about it, but I saw marks on the lawn where he used a ladder to climb up and get it.”

“What’s his unit number?”

Jason told him, and after a few taps on his keyboard, the officer came up with the name of the resident.

“Joseph Moretti,” he said, looking closely at the screen. “The name seems strangely familiar, but I’m not sure. Wait right here while I get someone else to sit at this desk. I’ll go over there with you and take a look.”

“My dad and I already talked to him, but he said he didn’t have it. What do you think we should do?”

“You understand I’m not a police officer, right? Just so you know, I can’t force him to do anything.”

“You can’t?”

“No. I can talk to him, but if he doesn’t cooperate, there’s not much else...”

“You can’t search his home for it?”

“Negative. If he doesn’t give you back the drone, you’ll have to sue him in civil court.”

The words hit Jason like a punch to the gut. *Civil court?* His mind spun as he tried to process how exactly he would explain that to Luke.

The security officer got up from his seat and went back to ask another officer to take his place at the front desk. Jason waited with his family until the security officer returned. “What’s your name, son?”

“My name’s Jason. What’s yours?” The man was so tall that Jason had to look up when he spoke to him.

“Officer William Johnson,” he said, reaching down and extending his hand to Jason. Jason smiled broadly they shook hands. “You can call me Bill,” he said. “Why don’t you ride with me? We can work out a plan while we drive over there. I hope that’s okay with your family.”

Jason turned and spoke briefly with his dad, who stood behind him, and his dad agreed to let him ride with the officer. He and his mom would follow with Amy in their car. Jason climbed into one of the parked SUVs marked “Security,” and during the short drive, Officer Bill discussed what he planned to do. He told Jason to stand next to him and, if Joseph said he knew nothing, explain again that he landed the drone on his roof.

“I’ll do my best to scare him into giving you your drone back,” Bill said. “But he might not scare easily. If he’s savvy, he knows I can’t enter his home. I’m not qualified to even apply for a warrant to conduct a search.”

“If he says he doesn’t have the drone, then what do we do?”

“I don’t do anything. You’ll have to sue him.”

“But he’s a *thief*. He broke *the law*,” Jason protested. He suddenly felt angry and righteous that this man stole his drone. “Can’t we call the police?”

“You could report the theft to the Somers police, but I doubt they’ll do anything.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s going to be a matter of *you said, he said*. If he denies having it, and you don’t have any evidence to show what he did, then...”

“But I do,” Jason said. “We’ve recorded the whole thing, including when he shot at the drone...”

“He *shot*...?” While driving, Billy looked over at Jason. “You mean with a *gun*?”

“Yeah. He was at the firing range and...”

“The *firing range*? Where the heck is that?”

“It’s just north of here. He was there yesterday, and again today, practicing his aim.”

Bill slammed on the brakes and stopped the car so quickly that Jason’s mother, driving the family car behind them, almost crashed into the rear of the SUV. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked. “I remember this Joe Moretti now. Some company—I can’t remember the name—owns that unit he’s renting. But it was odd. When new people move in here at Heritage Hills, we run a quick background check. We don’t keep a record of it, but we like to be sure our residents are on the up and up. In this case, I remember doing the research but I couldn’t find *anything*. *Nothing*. It was as if Moretti didn’t exist.”

“Is that bad?”

“That’s nearly unheard of. The Internet has information on everybody. Drawing a blank is just a red flag. There may be something off about this guy. I’m not sure I want you with me when I speak to him.”

“But I’d like to hear what he says.”

“You have a cell phone, right?”

“Yeah. Right here.” Jason fished his phone out of his pocket and held it up.

“Give me your number. I’ll call you just before I ring the man’s bell and put my phone in my pocket. You answer your phone and don’t hang up. You’ll hear the whole thing.”

“I like that idea. And I’ll record the conversation.”

“Thanks, Partner,” Bill said and gave Jason a high five. “We’re a team.”

Chapter 11:

Jason got out of the security SUV and walked back to join his family. He climbed into the back seat of the car with Amy and explained why the officer had suddenly stopped. “He remembered checking up on the guy who stole my drone. Like he told us when Dad was with me, his name’s Joe Moretti. He tried to do a background check on him when he moved in, but it turns out there’s no such person. Like he’s a ghost or something.”

Jason’s mother, Marjorie, turned around and stared at him with wide eyes. Amy slid away from him and uttered, “*Yikes!* We’d better stay away.”

“Amy’s right,” Jason’s father said. “We’d better just forget about getting your drone back and go on home.”

“Bill’s going over there to try one more time. He wants me to be close by but out of sight.”

“Why? You shouldn’t be anywhere near that guy. It’s not safe.”

“Bill said he’d call me on his cell phone. I’m supposed to stay connected so we can hear what’s going on. If he gets in trouble, we’ll know it right away and can call 911.”

“We don’t want him getting hurt either,” Jason’s mother agreed. “Maybe Jason’s right. He’s going in there to talk to that man for us. We should stay around and do what we can to help.”

“All right. I agree,” Jason’s dad conceded as they watched Officer Bill’s car continuing toward the building where the drone went missing. “Go ahead and follow him. We’ll park in a space where this Joe Moretti guy can’t see us.”

They followed Bill's car but stopped short of Moretti's unit and parked in a free space. Jason pulled out his cell phone and asked Amy to do the same. "I'm going to put my phone on speaker," he said. "Amy, use your phone to record the sound from mine when Bill calls. Dad, be ready to dial 911 with your cell phone if we hear Bill's in trouble."

No one said anything further as they waited for the call. Jason felt the tension mounting, like a spring slowly being stretched, and noticed the others in the car were holding their breaths. When the call finally came in, Jason pressed "Accept" and then "Speaker." They heard a rustling sound, which Jason assumed was Bill's phone being stuffed into his breast pocket.

"Mr. Moretti?" Jason heard Bill say. "I'm Officer Bill Johnson from Heritage Hills Security. We've received a complaint about a missing drone."

"Oh, yeah? What's that got to do with me?"

"Do you know if a drone landed on your roof earlier today?"

"No, I don't."

"It's our understanding that it did. And now it's missing."

"I don't know anything about any drone."

"Did you speak to a young boy about this matter earlier?"

"Yeah. Snotty kid. He came here and said I took his drone. I told him I didn't."

"Would you mind if I come in and look for it? It will just take a minute."

"In here? No way. What are you, some kind of fake cop?" His tone of voice revealed a rising anger.

"All right then. Do you have a ladder I can borrow?"

"A *what*?" The man nearly shouted the word "what."

"A ladder. Is there a ladder in your garage?"

“Get the—”

Jason almost dropped the phone the moment the swear words started pouring out. He tapped out of speakerphone when Amy put her hands over her ears. But even at that volume, he could still hear the man’s voice raising with every abusive remark.

“No problem,” Bill replied calmly.

Jason put it on speaker once more.

“I’ll call maintenance and get a ladder,” Bill continued. “I need to climb up and take a look at your roof.”

“No, you won’t. Don’t even *think* about going up there,” the man said menacingly.

“You don’t own the roof, sir. It belongs to your condo. I can go up there, and I will. Dust collects on these flat roofs and, if a drone landed there, it left a mark. And if you went up there to get it, there will be footprints.”

Silence followed this remark. Nothing came over Jason’s phone for nearly a minute and he thought the connection might have been broken. He was just about to press the red end-call button when he heard Moretti speak again.

“Okay, here is your goddamn drone,” he said. “Take it and get the—”

Even as Moretti cursed, Jason breathed a sigh of relief. Bill ended the call, and Jason set his phone on the seat beside him. He and his family stared out the window and, a few moments later, saw Officer Bill walking toward them carrying the missing drone.

With a huge smile on his face, Jason practically jumped out of the car and ran up to Bill, thanking him effusively.

Jason’s father climbed out of the car too and joined them. “That was brilliant!” his father said, and after Officer Bill handed Jason the drone, he shook his hand.

“I didn’t know there was dust on those roofs,” Jason remarked, referring to the flat roofs on many of the condo units.

“Well, actually there isn’t,” Bill replied.

“There isn’t? But you said...”

“That was just a bluff,” he told Jason with a wink. “One of the most useful tools in police work.”

Chapter 12:

Jason had arranged to meet his friends Matt and Luke at their secret hideout the morning after they returned from vacation. So at nine o'clock, Jason's mom drove him up to Recreation Area 2 with the suitcase-like box that held the drone and its controller. He got out and lugged the heavy box up to the pavilion at the top of the West Hill. He placed it on the picnic table and had to wait only a few minutes before seeing Matt, and then Luke, trek up the hill. They gave each other a high five and sat down at the table to catch up.

Luke had been to Europe with his parents, starting in Paris. They rented a car and drove due east to Strasbourg. After touring the city, they traveled south on the French side of the Rhine River to Basil, Switzerland, following the wine trail and enjoying sights and the culinary delights of French Alsace. Continuing on from Basil, they arrived in Bern, where they took a train through "Heidi" country to the top of a mountain peak. After an exhausting two weeks, they flew from Bern back to Paris, changed planes and flew home.

Matt's family had flown to Denver to vacation in Colorado and Utah. They changed planes and flew the short distance to Durango in the Rocky Mountains to ride the most famous steam train in America: the Durango & Silverton Narrow-Gauge Railroad. The train snaked through beautiful countryside along the Animas River from Durango to the pioneer mining town of Silverton, where they visited an old silver mine. From there they rented a car and continued north to Grand Junction, then west to Moab, Utah, and the Arches National Park, and finally north again to Salt Lake City and flew home.

After boasting of their vacation adventures, Luke and Matt looked at Jason. “What about you?” they asked in unison, somewhat sympathetically because they knew Jason had been stuck at home.

Jason simply nodded and hesitantly opened the box. “I learned to fly this,” he said, lifting the drone out of its case and placing it carefully on the table. “I can fly it really well now. Want to see?”

The other two said, “Sure,” and stood up, likely thinking they would take the drone and the controller down to the tennis court as they had done before.

“No need to get up. I can fly it from here. Just watch.”

Jason turned on the controller and then the drone. He had fully charged their batteries overnight in anticipation of giving his friends a flying demonstration. He placed the controller in Attitude Mode to fly the drone manually.

“Just one thing,” Jason said. “Don’t talk to me while I’m flying. I need to concentrate.”

Luke and Matt agreed. They remained silent while they stood and watched the drone rise slowly off the table.

* * * *

I take off and hover over the tabletop. It takes me a few moments to get my bearings and to sink deeply into my flying mood, but once I’m locked in, I’m good to go.

We are inside the pavilion, an open shed supported by six posts, so I start by flying out of the shed and back again, slipping back and forth between the posts. I fly up close to Matt and Luke at eye level, looking straight at them, and then turn on my heels and zip away.

I fly away from the pavilion and into the forest, flitting free among the trees five feet off the ground, taking care to avoid tree branches and what little underbrush there is. I almost forget my friends are watching me. I zig this way and that, like a butterfly or a bee, flying close to obstacles but always missing them. After flying so far that the pavilion is almost out of sight, I meander back to what seems to be the highest point on this high hill. I hover there for a moment and look directly downward.

What I see is the surveyor's marker I'd noticed before when my friends first took me there and showed off their hideout area. I then look back toward the pavilion and see Matt and Luke. They are both watching me, their eyes wide as if I were a high-flying acrobat in the Cirque du Soleil, their mouths open in amazement. Having shown them what I can do, I come back and settle down calmly in the middle of the table.

* * * *

“What do you think?” Jason asked, beaming broadly.

Matt and Luke just stared at him without speaking.

Eventually Luke spoke up. “Do you want to keep the drone for awhile?” Jason first thought he was joking, but his face showed he was serious. “I mean, I’ll never be able to fly it like that. That was *awesome*.”

“It’s *your* drone, Luke. You can have fun with it. But I hope you’ll let me fly it again now and then.”

“You got it. You can take it whenever you want. As long as you let Matt and me watch you fly.”

“I’d like that. As a matter of fact, the drone should come in handy in our detective work.” Jason looked at Mark, suspecting he had been feeling a bit left out at this point because he didn’t know how to fly the drone. “By the way, I think I have a new case for us.”

Matt perked up. “Really? A new case?”

“Yeah. I think so. Let me tell you what happened while you guys were away having a great time on vacation.”

For the next half hour, Jason regaled Matt and Luke with his adventures right there in Heritage Hills. As he told the story, Jason could tell he had their full attention, and he wondered if they felt a mix of envy of what he had experienced and regret that they hadn’t been home to participate.

“It’s awfully suspicious Joe gave you this drone back, just like that,” Matt said. “I’ll bet there’s something up on his roof he didn’t want you to see.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Jason replied, while Luke nodded in agreement. “But I waited for you guys before flying over there again. I’d like to work together with you on this.”

“We’re a team,” Matt said, smiling broadly. “I’d like that too.”

“Me too,” Luke agreed. “We should have a name for our team. We need a ‘brand,’ like, say, ‘The Three Amigos’ or something.”

“We ought to include the word ‘detectives’ in our name so people know what we’re doing,” Matt said. “Jason takes the lead in this stuff, so why don’t we call ourselves ‘Jason and the Detectives’?”

“Okay by me,” Luke replied. “Jason?”

Jason felt a stab of pride but uttered a resigned sigh. “I don’t see why not. Sounds good to me.”

Chapter 13:

“Luke, plug in the drone and the controller as soon as you get home and charge the batteries. Matt, ask your dad if he can get us information on Joe Moretti from the police files.”

Having been given the lead role in the newly branded team of detectives, Jason felt it was all right to tell his friends what to do. He was generally a shy person by nature who didn’t like to intrude or annoy, but when events required it, he was fully confident and able to assert himself.

That afternoon, Jason, Matt and Luke rode their bicycles over to the East Hill and hid them among the bushes on the side of the road near Joe Moretti’s condo unit. Luke had strapped the case with the drone and controller onto the small luggage platform over the rear fender. Before hiding his bike, he offloaded the case and took out its contents. He gave the controller to Jason and carried the drone himself as all three of them walked the rest of the way toward their destination. Remaining out of sight, Jason and Luke worked together to launch the drone into the air. As he’d done several times before, Jason had borrowed his sister’s iPad to pilot the drone.

According to plan, Luke and Matt continued on and took separate positions to watch Moretti’s unit, making sure he stayed inside while Jason flew the drone overhead to investigate the roof. Moretti had never seen Matt or Luke before, so in the unlikely event that he saw them, he would not suspect the two were spying on him. If Moretti did become aware of the drone somehow and stepped out of his unit to investigate, whoever saw him first would quickly text Jason, and he would make the drone disappear by flying it away.

* * * *

I take off and fly straight up until I'm way above the trees. I look around, admiring the breathtaking view, then look down and see Joe Moretti's unit nearby. I fly over in that direction until his roof is directly below me and drop straight down, slowing as I come closer and closer. When I'm about ten feet from the roof, I stop descending and hover there to look around.

I don't see anything out of the ordinary at first. It is a flat roof with nothing more than a brown plastic vent pipe, probably from a bathroom, protruding upward. I'm about to fly away when I notice something attached to the pipe. I fly down to get a closer look.

An uninsulated wire, or maybe a rod, extends upward on one side of the pipe. It is held in place by clips and is attached to a number of uninsulated wires or rods extending outward in some kind of array. You wouldn't notice them from a distance because they lay flat and were the same light brown color as the roof.

I take one last look around to be sure I don't miss anything else and see a fish-eye videocam staring back at me! That same instant I receive a text from Matt telling me that Moretti just ran out his front door with a rifle.

Looking down and feel an adrenaline rush as I see him turn around and stare up in my direction. He takes aim with the rifle, but before he can fire, I fly off in the opposite direction, toward the rear of the unit, out of sight. Behind me I hear the crack of a single rifle shot, but Moretti is too late. I can only hope that the bullet he fired doesn't hit someone when it comes down.

I'm about to return to the place from where I took off when I suddenly wonder: Why am I afraid? I realize I'm not really in the drone. Moretti can't possibly shoot at me because he has no idea where I actually am. I can be anywhere in the surrounding countryside while I fly the drone.

I quickly turn the drone around and head back to do battle with Moretti. What the heck, I say to myself: The worst that can happen is that Moretti shoots me—I mean, the drone—out of the air. The drone is just a thing. It can be replaced. And it's even insured. The insurance policy should cover being shot at by a bad guy, right?

Keeping five feet off the ground, I follow the road to Moretti's unit. I come around a curve and there he is, with his rifle still aimed upward and looking mad as hell. I head straight for him at high speed. It takes him a moment to realize what's happening, so I reach him before he can bring his gun down and point it in my direction. Just before I reach him, I veer off to the right and fly completely around him, counterclockwise, keeping about three feet away. He tries to hit me with the gun barrel, using it like a club, but I'm too fast for him. I back away but keep going, flying in circles, making him even more angry. He follows me with his eyes, turning around and around until, before he realizes it, he becomes dizzy and nearly trips and falls. When I see him lose his balance, I fly straight in and collide with the top of his head. It hurts him a lot more than it does me, because I'm not a person. I'm a thing, and things don't feel pain.

He drops the rifle, but he doesn't fall. I back away just out of reach. He lunges, reaching out with both hands to grab me, but I'm too quick. He misses me and his hands catch only air. I come in closer one more time to lure him away from the gun, which is lying where it fell on the asphalt. Out of the corner of my eye I see Luke sneaking up behind Moretti to grab the gun. Matt is off to one side, watching and waiting for his chance to join in the action.

Looking only in my direction Moretti couldn't see Luke sneak up behind him pick up the gun. Luke stepped back a few paces and pointed the gun in Moretti's direction. "Stop right there!" he shouted, stopping Moretti in his tracks. Moretti turned to look, and when he saw the gun, he raised his hands automatically.

Moretti swore at Luke, and after a beat he added, “You’re not going to shoot me. You’re just a kid!” He lowered his hands.

Luke holds the gun steady. “Give it a try. Make a move and see what happens. You’ll make my day.”

“What are you? Clint Eastwood?”

“Yeah, and you’re the bad guy.”

While they were talking, I saw Matt walk over to Moretti’s unit. He opened the front door and said, “I can’t go in. That would be trespassing. But *you* can,” meaning the drone. “The law against trespassing applies only to *people*.”

Matt couldn’t see me because I was not really in the drone, but if he could, he’d see me smile. I did a little jig in the air to thank him for his support and flew inside the unit to take a look around.

Chapter 14:

I have to really concentrate now that I'm inside. I need to focus, focus, focus. Don't want to run into anything. Disturb anything. When I leave, everything must look exactly the same as when I came in here. Luke and Matt will keep Moretti outside for a few minutes. Maybe. I hope.

Every condo unit in Heritage Hills is different. Even though there are only a limited number of model floor plans, these plans were all adjusted and adapted to fit into the landscape and to fit with other units to which they're attached. Fact is, I don't know what I'm dealing with here in Moretti's unit.

Entering the front door, the first thing I see is a short hallway with stairs going up to a second floor. I advance forward a few feet, turn left and float into the kitchen. I turn right and move into the dining area, and turn right again to the living area. I see nothing out of the ordinary, so I float up the stairway to the bedroom level.

At the head of the stairs, I turn left and enter the master bedroom suite. There's a king-size bed and a chest of drawers. Off to the right there's a walk-in closet. The door is open, so I fly in, buzz around a bit and fly out. There's nothing there except what you'd expect: some suits, sports jackets and shoes on the floor. The bathroom is big, but it's just a bathroom. I take a quick peek and back away.

Leaving the master bedroom, I float down the hall and turn left into the open door of a second bedroom. So far, I've found nothing suspicious and am beginning to think Joe Moretti is just an ordinary guy living an ordinary life. I stop at the doorway, hovering, and stare into the room.

Holy crap! Straight ahead of me, on the opposite wall, is a huge rack of guns. Big ones, little ones and everything in between. There's a bench in front of it with some tools and metal things that look like baseballs.

To the left, on the adjacent wall, is a workbench crammed with computers and some electronic things, one of them with dials and knobs that looks something like a radio. Except for the three computer screens, I don't really recognize any of this stuff. It looks important, so I fly in for a closer look. Everything will show up in the recording I'm making, so I can go over it later.

Once I'm done, I quickly leave the room, glide down the stairwell, and sail out through the front door of the unit, which Matt is still holding open. Amy's iPad screen shows I've been in Moretti's place no more than five minutes. But I've seen so much, it seems a lot longer.

Outside I find Moretti standing there, screaming at Matt and Luke. Luke's still holding the gun on him, but he looks a bit scared. Matt too. I can't imagine what they're thinking. They both look relieved when they see me. I do a three-sixty to show it's all good—we got what we came for—and I lead them away. They follow me down the road to where we've hidden our bikes.

* * * *

Luke carried Moretti's rifle with him as he followed the drone, running side by side with Matt. Meanwhile, Moretti while took cover his unit, thinking Luke might turn around and shoot him. When out of sight, Luke saw some dense bushes and tossed the gun.

Jason landed the drone and secured it in the case on the back of Luke's bike before the three of them rode away toward the West Hill as fast as they could pedal.

When they got to the traffic light at Warren Street, they stopped and walked, pushing their bikes across the road and then up the long steep hill on West Hill Drive. As they walked, Jason told his friends what he had seen on Moretti's roof and inside his unit. Since the video stream taken during the flight had been recorded, he described only the things he thought were important, like the roof antenna, the electronic stuff and the guns.

"Matt, did you tell your dad to check the police files for Joe Moretti?"

"Yeah, I told him. He said he'd look into it and get back to me. But he asked me why."

"What did you say?"

"I told him the guy stole your drone and wouldn't give it back. We didn't know much else at the time."

"I'm not sure we should tell him what we saw today."

"Why?"

"For one thing, he might not like it that we snuck in there and checked out the guy's unit. For another, if you tell him we found guns and stuff, he'll tell you to keep away from him."

"But we didn't sneak in there, the *drone* did. And if my dad finds out the guy has a rap sheet, he'll say I have to stay away from him anyway."

"You want to know what I think?" Luke chimed in.

"What?" Matt and Jason responded in unison.

"I bet this guy doesn't have a rap sheet. He's much too smart for that."

Chapter 15:

Losif Moretov, a/k/a Joseph Moretti, ran after the boys when they left him, and he saw Luke toss his rifle. He quickly retrieved the weapon from the bushes and walked back to his home. Entering his unit, he went straight upstairs to the room he used as an office. He looked around carefully but saw nothing had been disturbed. He returned the rifle to its place at the center of the far wall and sat down in front of the workbench to the left. He powered up one of the radios and set the transmission frequency.

Next, he booted up a word processing application on one of the computers and typed in a message. He proofread the message three times, transferred the text to the message box on another app, and pressed “TRANSMIT.”

“Those little shits,” he swore out loud. “I’ll fix their dumbasses so they’ll never come around here again.”

It took no more than six minutes for the response to come back. It read: *Take no action in retaliation against minors. You will receive further instructions shortly.*

Losif slammed his fist down on the bench, making a *whomp* sound, and cursed in Russian.

Chapter 16:

When Matt returned home, he went directly to his room on the second floor and shut the door. He opened the laptop on his desk, pulled up the Chrome Internet navigator, and typed “Joseph Moretti.” He didn’t know what he expected to find, but he was surprised at what came up.

There were more than fifty professionals in the United States alone who bore that name. Matt even found a Wikipedia page devoted to Joseph Edward Moretti, a rock guitarist born in Scotland who moved first to London and then to South Africa. He died at age seventy-three of lung cancer after a stunning career with many well-known rock bands. Matt checked the addresses of each Moretti, but although there were many other residents with Italian-sounding names in Heritage Hills, a Moretti was not among them.

Matt’s mother shouted up to him from downstairs, saying dinner was ready. He closed his laptop, turned out the light and went down. His parents were already sitting at the dinner table.

“I haven’t seen much of either of you two boys today,” his mom chirped, referring to her husband as well as to Matt. “What have you been up to?”

Matt looked over at his father, waiting for him to respond first.

“Same old, same old,” he said. “Patrolled the roads all day and stopped a bunch of speeders. Got some pretty lame excuses. Some were funny, but I’d heard them all before. At four thirty, it’s almost time to head back to the police station, and I see this guy in an SUV—it’s like *orange*, so you can’t not notice it—heading south on six eighty-four.”

That’s the guy. Matt’s hand gripped the edge of his chair, as if holding on would somehow make the information come faster.

“He’s driving awfully slowly,” his father continues, “like he’s on the phone or something. He’d be holding up traffic if he wasn’t in the far-right lane. I followed him for a couple of miles to watch what he’s doing. The car is wandering from side to side in the lane, but he keeps within the white lines.”

Matt hung on every word, fighting the urge to skip ahead and learn what his father had discovered.

“I’m a good way back, so I’m pretty sure he doesn’t notice me in the rearview mirror. This gives me time to run his registration. Turns out his name is Joseph Moretti, the same name you asked me to check out. So I run his driver’s license too, and what I get back is pretty weird. The guy got his driver’s license for the very first time less than a year ago. He’s forty-eight years old, and as far as the records show, he’s never had a license before. *Now* he decides to take driving lessons and go for the license?

“And another thing: As soon as he got his driver’s license, he went out and bought himself that orange car. Brand new and for cash, it turns out. I contacted the dealer named on the license plate holder. It’s like this guy didn’t exist before he moved to Heritage Hills last year.”

Matt was stunned. He looked at his father and said nothing at first. After a beat, he said, “That’s what Officer Bill told Jason too. It’s like he came out of nowhere.”

“Officer Bill?”

Matt’s mother spoke up. “He’s the security officer at the Activities Center who helped Jason get the drone back.”

“Security officer? This is the first time I’m hearing this. He helped Jason get his drone?”

“Matt and his friends Luke and Jason went to the man’s condo unit today,” Matt’s mother replied. “They wanted to find out why he took the drone. Something about the man’s roof.”

“His roof? What about his roof?”

“The drone was up on the roof when he stole it.”

“Was there something wrong with the roof?”

“No, but...”

“Maybe you should start from the beginning. Matt, what’s going on?”

Chapter 17:

“First of all, Dad, Mr. Moretti’s car is not *orange*. It was like orangey-brown in color. I’d say it looks ‘copper-colored.’”

“Orange? Copper color? So what?”

“The car stands out because of its color. Yeah, it’s different, but it’s not that bright. Just sayin’.”

“Okay. Copper-colored. So tell me, what have you been doing with this guy Moretti?”

Matt took a deep breath and began to relate and explain what had happened when he, Luke and Jason rode over to the East Hill on their bicycles and Jason flew the drone, first above the roof and then inside Moretti’s condominium unit. As Matt spoke, the look on his dad’s face grew more and more incredulous.

“Jason flew the drone *inside* his unit?” Matt’s father stared at him.

“Sure, Dad. We weren’t trespassing. We never went in there. Only the drone.”

“And you thought that was okay? Would you think it’s okay to install a video camera in someone’s home?”

“Well, no, but...”

“That’s just what you did when you went in with the drone. It’s against the law.”

“Wait ’til I tell you what we found. You’ll see it’s suspicious.”

“Don’t tell me. I don’t want to know. Even if I went inside his unit and took a photo of something incriminating, it’s not evidence I could use to convict him.”

“Well, that’s dumb! Why not?”

“I obtained it through unreasonable search and seizure.”

“Okay, that might be true. But we could use it to find out more about him.”

“To do that, I’ll have to get a warrant to search his place. Then whatever I find can be used in court.”

“And how do you do that, Dad?” Matt replied sarcastically. He was getting frustrated with the legal niceties. “You’re the police officer. You tell me.”

“I’ll have to submit an application to a judge, listing the reasons to suspect Moretti’s committed a crime.”

“Well, that’s easy,” Matt said, a bit relieved now that he was getting somewhere. “You can just show the video of what we found.”

“I can’t do that. I can’t use illegally obtained evidence to get a search warrant.”

“That’s dumb and dumber! You have evidence to suspect the guy’s a criminal, and you can’t use it?”

“Nope. If I submit tainted evidence to get a search warrant, then anything I find when I conduct the search will be tainted too. It’s called the ‘fruit of the poisonous tree.’ A prosecutor can’t use it.”

“Dumb, dumber, dumbest! What can my friends and I do then?”

“This is where detective work gets hard. You have to shadow him. Follow him wherever he goes. Don’t let him out of your sight, but don’t let him know you’re onto him. You have to catch him in the act.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You’ve got a car, but we don’t. We only have our bikes.”

“Maybe your mom can help,” Matt’s father said, winking at his wife across the table. “Moretti has never once seen our car. Especially when he sees a soccer mom at the wheel, he’ll never suspect he’s being followed.”

Chapter 18:

Outside on their patio, at the same time, Luke was relating to his father what had happened that afternoon at Joe Moretti's condominium unit.

"Jason can really fly my drone. He was practicing the whole time we were away on vacation. You gotta see what he can do. It's just *amazing*."

"Remember, son, it's *your* drone. We got it for you to have fun with." While they talked, Luke's father was pulling from pots the flower plants that were no longer blooming.

"I *love* flying it, Pop. But I can never beat Jason. He's got this... this knack. He's got super control."

"What can he do that you can't?"

"For one thing, he can fly the drone *inside* someone's home—a home he's never seen before—and look around. It's great for spying," Luke said, smiling.

"You know that's breaking and entering, right?" His father leaned over and grabbed the roots of dead flower plant, placing them into a paper bag for biodegradable disposal. "And spying is illegal, by the way."

"It's not a problem if there's no *breaking*. We went to a guy's home this morning. Jason flew the drone inside while Matt held the front door open. The guy was standing right there."

"Why didn't he stop you?" Luke's father continued working with the next plant.

"It's complicated, Pop. I don't want to say."

"Really?" Luke's father stood and stared at his son. "Life's complicated."

"You don't need to know."

"Well, now I do. You piqued my curiosity."

“There’s this guy, Joe Moretti,” Luke began. “He shot at my drone. Not once, but *twice*. He thinks he’s policing the airspace.”

“*He’s* the guy you went to see? A guy with a gun?” His father cursed.

“It’s not like that. He wasn’t shooting at *people*. And the first time he shot at the drone. He was at a firing range.”

“Let me get this straight: You and your friends went to see a guy with a gun who shot at your drone? What were you going to do, take his gun away?”

“No. We didn’t go there to see him. We didn’t even want to see him. We just wanted to see what was up on his roof.”

“His roof? I don’t follow.” Luke’s father looked incredulous.

“Yeah. I told you it was complicated. Jason flew the drone up there a few days ago, and the guy climbed up and took it down when Jason wasn’t looking.”

“He grabbed the drone?”

“Yeah, he took it and wouldn’t give it back.” Luke paused for a beat, then added quickly, “But we got it back.”

“You stole it back from him?”

“It wasn’t stealing. He gave it back when a guy from the security office told him to. He bluffed and said he’d climb up there and look for evidence if he didn’t.”

“I give up.” Luke’s father threw up his hands, palms out, to show he’d had enough. “As long as you don’t get arrested, what you do is fine with me. God knows, I’ve had to push the envelope myself a few times.”

“You mean break the law? I’ve often wondered, Pop.”

“It’s not called ‘breaking the law.’ It’s skirting the law and not getting caught. You need to do that sometimes to get ahead. How do you think I made my first million?”

“I don’t know, Pop. You tell me.”

“I don’t think so. Like you just said, it’s complicated.”

Chapter 19:

During the family dinner, Jason tried to avoid having to tell what happened when he and his friends were at Moretti's. Were his parents to ask him a direct question about it, he would have to tell the truth. Were his parents to find out what the three boys did that afternoon, they would probably ban him from ever going back there.

Amy came to his rescue by talking about her adventures that day. She held her parents practically spellbound as she related meeting two new friends at the nearby swimming pool. She had gone there with her ID badge and a small bag stuffed with her swimming gear—her swimsuit, a towel and a pair of sandals—and had changed into her swimsuit in the bathhouse.

As Amy told it, when she came out with her swimsuit on, she saw two girls in the kid-friendly pool, splashing each other with water and laughing hysterically. As she walked up to them, they stopped splashing and looked up at her. For a brief moment, Amy said, she felt uncomfortable until the younger one of the two girls asked her name.

“I told them my name and said we moved here just a few weeks ago,” Amy said. “Then I asked if I could join them.”

Amy went on to describe how the girls looked at each other and seemed to communicate by secret signal before introducing themselves. Tanja was starting seventh grade in the fall, which would be the same grade as Jason, while Chrissie was starting fifth, the same as herself.

Chrissie then invited Amy to join them and asked if she could swim.

“I told them I’d learned to swim at camp last summer,” Amy said. “When I joined them in the pool, they asked a lot of questions. They wanted to know all about us, especially Jason.”

Amy glanced at him. “I told them you had a bit of OCD, Jason. I hope you don’t mind.”

“OCD? Obsessive-compulsive disorder?” Marjorie interrupted. “That’s not true!”

“Yes, it *is*,” Amy insisted. “You told us that once. Now everyone knows it.”

Jason just smiled. He was actually proud of the fact that he liked to keep order. He tried to keep everything around him in place where it belonged. He kept his room clean and tidy and his schoolwork organized. And being on time was important to him; he always stayed ahead of his commitments.

Jason was losing interest in his sister’s storytelling...until she said something that caused his ears to perk up.

“Chrissie and Tanja both live on the East Hill, and her mom drove them there to swim in the pool. Chrissie pointed to her mom on one of the lounge chairs, reading a book. We then got to talking about things and, without my asking, Chrissie told me she saw a drone fly over her home and land on a roof next door. She saw it when she and her mom were getting into their car. Jason, that must have been *your drone!*”

“That was *me*,” Jason replied excitedly. “I saw them get in their car and drive away. Just before the iPad screen went blank.” Jason spoke as if he and the drone were one.

Marjorie finally spoke up. “It’s wonderful to hear you made new friends, Amy. Maybe you could ask them to come over. Jason, you could ask your friends to come too. I’m sure Amy’s friends would like to meet them and watch you and Luke fly the drone.”

“Or maybe we could bring it over to Chrissie’s and fly it there.”

“I’d rather you stayed away from Moretti,” said Tom. “Fly it over there from here if you want, but there’s no telling what Moretti would do if he sees you. The great thing about a drone is that it lets you see from a distance.”

“I understand that, Dad. Luke, Matt and I have been talking about this. We want to do a stakeout on Moretti and find out what he’s up to, but we can’t let him see the drone. Maybe Amy’s new friends can help.”

“We girls can join you guys,” Amy said brightly. “You told me you have this awesome new name, ‘Jason and the Detectives.’ It sounds like this huge detective agency, so you’re going to need more detectives.”

“I’ll talk to Matt and Luke. But I know what they’ll say: ‘We don’t want a bunch of sissies. Who ever heard of a girl detective?’”

“Don’t you agree with them, Jason. They’d probably say that when I was a kid and I’d agree with them then, but the times, they sure have changed,” said Tom.

“And that’s a good thing,” Marjorie added. “We’ve come a long way since your dad was a kid.”

“If they don’t let us in, we’ll outsmart you guys, you’ll see,” Amy said firmly. “You’re going to find out what girl power can do.”

Chapter 20:

When morning came, Losif Moretov awoke with the light and went straight to his office to check for messages. He sat down at the desk in front of the computer screen and keyboard and opened a secure app. What appeared, decrypted and translated into English, was a short paragraph of instructions.

This was followed by a warning notice Losif had seen many times before but had always ignored.

If you are captured or killed, the Russian Government will disavow any knowledge of your actions.

Considering the action that Russia was ordering him to take, of course it would disavow any knowledge. His friends in government had stonewalled the world before, and they would do it again.

Losif shut down the computer and returned to his bedroom, where he dressed in jeans and a light-blue shirt. He strapped on a shoulder holster, then donned a navy-blue sport jacket which covered it nicely. He added a plain dark-blue baseball cap without brand marks or insignia. Lastly, he donned his dark aviator glasses. Dressed this way, he knew he would emulate an average American working man and could not be easily described by a witness to his malevolent actions.

He returned to the office and took down a SIG Sauer P320 9mm compact pistol from its wall mount. He jammed a full magazine into the pistol grip and slipped the weapon into his holster.

He hurried downstairs and out the front door of his condominium unit. Taking a key from his left jeans pocket, he locked the front door and walked out to the main road. A Heritage Hills bus came along within a minute.

The bus door opened and the driver asked, “You Joe Moretti?”

“Ya,” Losif uttered under his breath as he climbed in. Looking around, he saw a few passengers had already boarded, but the front seat behind the bus driver was unoccupied. He took that seat.

“You Italian?” the driver asked, making conversation as he accelerated the bus forward with a roar of the engine. “I’m Antonio. Left Italy as a kid. Haven’t gone back, even to visit.”

Losif said nothing, thinking that his faint accent, which wasn’t at all Italian, might give him away.

For the next fifteen minutes, the bus wended its way through the byways of Heritage Hills, picking up further passengers. It then exited the property and followed country roads to the railroad station at Goldens Bridge. Glad that Antonio didn’t try again to converse with him, Losif sat calmly, lost in thought about his assigned mission.

At the station, Losif was the first to disembark and walk up the steps. In the crossover passage at the top of the stairs, he bought a round-trip ticket to New York City from a vending machine, then proceeded down the stairs on the other side to the station platform.

He walked forward along the platform and stood waiting for the train. It was his usual practice to enter the first car on the train to New York City so he would be the first to disembark at Grand Central Station at the end of the ride. He pretended to check email on his smartphone while at the same time eyeing those near him as he waited for the train, but he saw nothing out of the ordinary. He didn’t recognize anyone, and for that reason he assumed no one recognized him.

It was his habit to remain constantly vigilant during any trip away from his home base at Heritage Hills.

The train arrived and he stepped forward into the first car, followed by others on the platform behind him. He found an empty seat on the aisle and was about to sit when a woman asked to take the adjacent seat by the window. Without saying a word, he stepped aside, allowing her to pass, then sat down as the train began to move.

He closed his eyes and pretended to sleep but changed his mind after a moment and took out his smartphone. He checked his text messages and was surprised to see one from what he called “the source.” The simple message, “RPM 10.30,” was cleartext.

Losif held the smartphone close to his chest to hide the screen from prying eyes, but he couldn’t prevent the woman next to him from seeing the message. Although she appeared to be engrossed in something, he saw her momentarily glance down at the screen.

It didn’t matter that she saw the message, he told himself. She would have no idea what it meant. He continued working his smartphone, as did many others on the train, to blend in and draw suspicion away from the purpose of his trip. In the meantime, he mentally walked through a variety of scenarios that might occur in his upcoming mission. Before he knew it, his train had entered the long tunnel under Park Avenue that ended in Grand Central Terminal. Five minutes later, as the train slowed, he got up and walked forward to the door. He noticed the woman who sat next to him did the same.

When the train finally stopped and the doors opened, Losif stepped off and walked forward on the platform to the giant waiting room of Grand Central. He walked at a brisk pace, as did most New Yorkers, but in this case especially so to evade the woman who appeared to be following him. He turned right in the lobby and jogged up the stairs to the Vanderbilt Avenue

exit. At the cabstand, he hailed a yellow cab, but before entering, he stopped briefly and looked over his shoulder. The woman was nowhere in sight.

He gave the cab driver the address of the Consulate General of the Russian Federation.

Chapter 21:

At the dinner table that evening, Jason and Amy's mother, Marjorie, seemed anxious to tell everyone what she did that day. After everyone had helped themselves to a serving of spaghetti and homemade meatballs and marinara sauce, and after Tom, their father, had intoned grace, Marjorie spoke up.

"I went to the City today to get tickets to the show we all talked about," she began. "You know I hate to buy tickets online because you can't pick and choose your seats. It's a heck of a long way to the box office, but I had the extra time and the tickets are cheaper there.

"Anyway, I drove to the railroad station to catch the ten o'clock train, and just as I was getting out of the car, I saw the Heritage Hills bus pull up. To avoid the crowd, I hurried ahead and took the elevator up. I got my train ticket from the machine and was about to walk down the stairs to the platform when I saw him."

"Saw him? Who?" Tom asked.

"Joe Moretti. He was there, buying his ticket."

"What? A ticket to the City?"

"I couldn't see what the ticket was for, but it turned out it was. I followed him."

"*Really*, Mom?" Jason was startled. "You followed that guy? Weren't you afraid?"

"Not at all. He didn't know me from Adam. He's never seen me before, remember? I stayed in the car when you and that security man—Officer Bill, I think his name was—went to his condo unit and asked him to give you back your drone."

"Yeah, I remember," Jason said. "But he could have noticed you were following."

“I don’t think he did. I was just another person standing on the platform when he walked up. I figured he might want to get on the first car of the train, and I guessed right. I followed him into the car when the train arrived, and I sat down in the seat right next to him.”

Jason and Amy, and Jason’s father too, stared at her with alarm. They all appeared too astonished to say anything.

“So, we went all the way to the City together,” Marjorie continued. “I saw him look at his phone and secretly glanced at his screen, but I couldn’t tell what was on it. Just a bunch of letters and numbers it seemed to me. Anyway, when we reached Grand Central, he hurried to get off. I was right behind him, but from that point he practically ran and I had trouble keeping up. I didn’t want to run after him because then he’d know for sure I was following.”

“You lost him?” Amy asked, clearly disappointed at her mom’s performance as a sleuth.

“Actually, no. I walked normally, so I kind of lost him. But I thought he might go to the cab stand on Vanderbilt, and again I was right. When I got there, he was just pulling away. I quickly jumped into another cab and asked the driver to follow him. I’ll bet you can’t guess where he went...”

No one said anything until Jason chimed in again. “It’s a big city, Mom. He could have gone anywhere. Just tell us.”

“The Russian consulate up on Ninety-first Street, near Central Park. He got out of the cab and went in there as if they were expecting him. I got a picture with my phone. Here, let me show you.” Marjorie brought up the photo on her phone and handed it to Tom, who looked and passed it on to Jason, who passed it to Amy. It showed unmistakably the Joe Moretti they all knew, walking toward a building with a large green awning. A man dressed in a military uniform stood at the entryway.

“What did you do then?”

“There’s nothing I *could* do. After I took that picture, I told my cab driver to continue on to Times Square. He waited for me while I went in to the theater box office and then took me back to Grand Central.

“By the way. I got some *great* seats for the Broadway show. We’re in the orchestra, front and center.”

Chapter 22:

The next morning, Saturday, Tom and Marjorie slept in. Jason and Amy arose at their usual time and, as they often did on a weekend, made a breakfast of pancakes and bacon for the whole family. They worked together as a well-oiled team, Amy preparing the batter and Jason flipping the flapjacks and frying the bacon. When they were done, they placed the food in the oven to keep it warm until their parents came down in their bathrobes.

Jason opened the front door and retrieved the *New York Times*, which was dropped on their doorstep every Saturday and Sunday. He brought it to the kitchen while Amy set the dining room table and filled a pitcher with orange juice.

Unfolding the paper, Jason couldn't help but notice the headline in the top right-hand column:

NEW YORK TIMES COLUMNIST MISSING

Last Seen Entering the Russian Consulate in New York City

The article was accompanied by a photo of the building on Ninety-first Street, just off Fifth Avenue, that housed the Consulate General of the Russian Federation. A tall man with a dark beard was shown walking toward the front door. The caption read "*Viktor Ivanov seen entering the consulate yesterday. Photo taken by videocam across the street at the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum.*"

"Amy, look at this!" Jason said, bringing the paper to the dining area to show his sister. "I think that's the same building with the green awning that Mom showed us yesterday."

Jason read aloud from the article.

“Viktor Ivanov, a Russian journalist, author and noted critic of the Russian Government and particularly of Russian President Vladimir Putin, entered the Russian consulate late yesterday to renew his Russian Passport. His wife told police he did not return to their Manhattan apartment. Her attempts to reach him by text, phone and email were unsuccessful.

“Officials from the NYPD were refused entry to the consulate, which is sovereign territory of the Russian Federation. Attempts to communicate with officials at the Russian consulate have been rebuffed.

“Ivanov relocated to the United States in June 2017 and immediately went into self-imposed exile. He began writing for The New York Times in September 2017 and has authored numerous articles sharply critical of President Putin. He is noted especially for a lengthy exposé on the poisoning of Alexei Navalny, a Russian opposition leader, dissident, and anti-corruption activist. This exposé, which appeared in The New Yorker Magazine, gave evidence that the assassination of Navalny was ordered by Putin.

“With almost two million Twitter followers, Ivanov is one of the most influential Russian dissidents. In addition to his writings, he is a regular guest on the major TV news networks in the United States and Britain.”

“OMG!” cried Amy. “Joe Moretti was there at the same time as that guy.”

“That is really weird,” Jason said. “What was he doing there?”

“Yeah. And why would he go to the Russian consulate?”

“Looks like a job for ‘Jason and the Detectives,’” Jason remarked with a wink.

“Oh, no. It’s a job for ‘Amy and Her Detectives,’” Amy replied. “If you won’t let us help you, we’ll do it on our own.”

“This is *our* case,” Jason protested.

“You’re going to stop us? We’ll solve this mystery before you do. We’ve got *girl power*.”

“Go ahead. I’ll bet fifty bucks you *girls* can’t do it,” Jason said.

“You’re on, fancy pants. It’s girls against the boys. We’ll see who finds out first.”

Chapter 23:

Jason and Amy's mom and dad walked into the dining area together.

"What's going on?" Tom was the first to speak.

"Here, look at *this*." Jason showed his parents the top story in the newspaper.

It took them a moment to read it, but when they finished, Tom gave a whistle. "That's a huge coincidence," he said. "And I don't believe in coincidences. This man, Moretti, might well be involved in this. If so, he's dangerous."

"Jason and I have been talking," Amy said. "We've got to be very careful, we know. We're going to work separately—him with his two guys and me and my two new friends—to try and find out why Joe Moretti was at the consulate. We'll see who has the better team."

"How are you going to do it?" Marjorie asked, her voice reflecting her concern.

"You want me to tell you right here in front of Jason? It's a *race*, Mom." Amy shot her a disapproving look.

"Yes, you're right. Let's go to the kitchen. Jason can talk to Dad out here."

"Just a minute," Tom interrupted. "You two ought to work together. You'll accomplish much more that way."

"Jason won't let us!" Amy protested. "He thinks 'Jason and the Detectives' are so special. We'll show *them*."

"What's that, Jason? You won't let the girls help you? That's *dumb*."

Jason's eyebrows scrunched in response to his father's emphasis on that last word.

"Come on, Dad. They're *girls*. What do they know?"

"I'm still standing right *here*," Amy said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

“On second thought, Amy, maybe you and your friends should go it alone,” Tom said, “and show these guys up.”

“Okay, okay,” Jason conceded. “I’ll ask Matt and Luke if the girls can join us. But I don’t make any promises.”

“That’s more like it. You’re going to need all the help you can get. Mom and I will help you too. We want to make sure you don’t get in trouble.”

After breakfast, Jason called Matt and Luke on their cell phones and asked them to meet him at their hideout at the top of the West Hill. Curious to learn what the meeting was about, they agreed to head for the hill right away.

Chapter 24:

Jason rode his bike up to Recreation Area 2 and climbed to the top of the hill to meet his friends at the hideout. Matt and Luke were already there when he arrived, sitting and talking together at the park bench beneath the pavilion.

Jason began by relating the story his mom had told about taking the same train as Joe Moretti and following him to the Russian consulate in New York City. “It was just luck that she saw Moretti. It wasn’t planned at all.”

“The Russian consulate?” Luke said. “What the heck?”

“Yeah, it’s weird, I know,” Jason agreed. “And there’s more. There’s a story in *The New York Times* today. Turns out there’s a guy named Viktor Ivanov who came from Russia a few years ago. He’s a journalist who writes a lot of articles about Russian President Vladimir Putin. He says Putin’s done some really bad stuff.

“According to the *Times*, Ivanov went to the consulate yesterday to renew his passport, and he never came out. His wife called the police, but there’s nothing they can do. They can’t enter the consulate because it’s considered a foreign country or something, and the Russians aren’t telling what happened to him. The *Times* had a photo on the front page showing Ivanov going in there.”

“So?” Matt asked. “You think Moretti had something to do with that?”

“Moretti and Ivanov were both there at the same time. That’s some coincidence, don’t you think?”

“Looks like a job for ‘Jason and the Detectives,’” Matt said. “But what can *we* do?”

“We could find out when he leaves his home,” Luke said, “and then follow him to see where he goes.”

“Yeah, but that means a stakeout,” Matt replied, clearly not happy with the prospect. “That’s gonna be *b-o-r-i-n-g*.” He stretched out the word “boring” to make a point.

“Maybe there’s another way,” Jason explained. “My sister, Amy, met a couple of girls at the pool, and one of them lives right across from Moretti. When I landed the drone on Moretti’s roof, the videocam faced in her direction, and I could see her mom backing their car out of their garage.”

“You plan to land it there again? What good would that do?” Matt asked.

“If you did, Moretti would grab it,” Luke protested. “Like he did before.”

“Not if it’s *inside* Amy’s friend’s house and aimed out the window,” Jason replied. “Moretti will never know it’s there. And we can take turns watching his front door on Amy’s iPad.”

Matt and Luke both stared at Jason as if a light bulb had been switched on. “Amy has a friend? And she’ll let us do that?” Matt wondered aloud.

“Amy hasn’t asked her yet, but I’m sure she would. As a matter of fact, Amy asked me if she and her two friends could join our group. They’d like to help us find out what Moretti’s up to.”

Matt and Luke looked at each other. After a beat, Luke spoke for both of them. “That’s a good idea, Jason. It can’t hurt to meet and talk to them about it.”

Jason was taken aback at his friends’ reaction. “That’s it then,” he said. “We’re agreed. Let’s talk to the girls.”

Chapter 25:

Sunday afternoon, Jason, Matt, Luke, and Amy sat at the picnic table in the boys' secret hideout and waited patiently for Amy's friends, Chrissie and Tanja. Amy had told them when and where they could meet Jason and the Detectives and explained how to get there.

According to Amy, Chrissie and Tanja had both been curious and excited to hear what she told them about her brother's small band of detectives. Their plan was to convince their moms to drop them off at Pool 2 under the pretense of going swimming.

The ruse must have worked, because two girls were now trudging up the hill past the tennis court, heading for the pavilion at the very top.

Amy stood. "We're here!" she shouted, waving both hands in the air. "*Come on up.*"

"*Jeepers*, what is this place?" Chrissie exclaimed as she looked up ahead and spotted Amy and the boys. She and Tanja completed the long climb and stood gaping at the scene. As they marveled at the surroundings, Jason's gaze shifted almost instinctively toward Tanja, the older of the two girls. Her face was slightly flushed from the hike, and Jason felt his pulse quicken.

Amy made introductions all around and the two sat down at the empty seats at the table.

"Thanks for coming," Jason began. Looking directly at Chrissie and Tanja with a welcome grin, he went right to the point. "There's a guy living here at Heritage Hills who we think is a crook. We're going to investigate what he's up to, and if it turns out he's as bad as we think he is, we're going to hand over whatever evidence we find to Matt's dad. He's a cop with the New York State Police. We'd like you to help us, but that would mean spending a lot of time

with us doing detective work. But before we tell you what we know about this guy, we need to ask you: Are you in, or are you out?"

Chrissie and Tanja looked over at each other, then at Amy. After a long beat they turned to Jason and nodded. "Yes," they said.

Jason was glad to hear their decision, but he didn't know yet if they'd make good detectives and actually be of assistance. He nevertheless decided to take a chance and tell them everything he and his friends had uncovered about the case thus far.

He told them about Luke's drone.

About his learning to fly.

About his flight over a firing range.

About a man at the range who shot at the drone.

About following the man in his copper-colored car.

About landing the drone on the man's roof.

About the man stealing the drone.

About Officer Bill identifying the man as Joe Moretti.

About Officer Bill retrieving the drone from Moretti.

About flying the drone *inside* Moretti's unit.

About his mom following Moretti to the Russian consulate.

About the *New York Times* report of a missing journalist.

The two girls listened intently, and when Jason finished, Chrissie said, "I always thought the guy living across the street from me was a weirdo. If you let me have that drone, I'll set it up inside my bedroom window. That way we can watch what he's doing twenty-four seven."

“It transmits to my iPad,” Amy explained. “I’ll pass it around so we can take turns in a stakeout. There are six people, so—twenty-four divided by six—each of us gets a four-hour shift. We’ll make a sign-up sheet and take turns. When we’re at school, we can try recording what happens but I don’t think we can record a whole day. We’ll see.”

“Meanwhile, there’s a lot the rest of us can do,” Tanja said. “We should take a good look at that article in the *Times*. I’ll bet we can learn more.” She turned to Jason and asked, “You said there was a photo?”

“Yeah. But it shows only Ivanov walking into the Russian consulate. There’s nothing about Moretti.”

“That’s *really* big,” Tanja said excitedly. “That means someone has a camera aimed at the door. It’s probably right across the street from the consulate. They’re watching to see whoever’s going in and going out. If they’ve saved the recordings from prior years, we could have them go through them to look for Moretti. They could start from when he moved in next to Chrissie. If they see him going into the consulate, we’d know there’s a Russian connection.”

“Could be my dad was right,” Jason commented. “It wasn’t just a coincidence. There’s a reason why Moretti and Ivanov were there at the same time.”

“Jason,” Tanja continued. “Have that security officer you know check to see when Moretti moved in. If he’s got a Russian connection, he probably went to the consulate more than once. Once we have a date, we can go to whoever operates that videocam and ask them to look for him, starting around that time.”

“If he went to the consulate more than once, we need to find out why,” Matt said. “But there’s no way we can...”

“But maybe there *is*,” Chrissie said excitedly. “Moretti lives right near me here at Heritage.”

“So what? He’ll never tell you anything,” Luke said.

“We can look inside his home when he’s away,” Chrissie replied. “I can pretend to be a good neighbor and offer to guard his place. If that doesn’t work, maybe Jason could persuade that security guy that he knows to use his passkey.”

“I doubt if he’ll do it, but I can try,” Jason said.

Hearing all of this “girl power,” as Amy called it, Jason could not help but think that she had been right. She and her two friends were going to be superstars on the detective team. His only concern now was whether he, Matt and Luke would be able to keep up.

Chapter 26:

The next day, Monday, was the first day of school after the summer recess. All six members of “Jason and the Detectives” had agreed not to tell anyone anything about the Moretti case, except their parents. They needed their parents’ support, and they knew, or at least *hoped*, that their parents would also understand the importance of keeping any information they may learn about the case strictly confidential.

When he got home from school, Jason went to his room and called the Heritage Hills security office to speak to his new friend, Officer Bill Johnson. To Jason’s pleasant surprise, Officer Bill happened to be in the office and quickly picked up.

“Security,” he answered. “Bill Johnson speaking.”

“Hi, Officer Bill. This is Jason. You helped me get my drone back a week ago?”

“Yes, of course, Jason!” Bill was clearly glad to hear from him. “What can I do for you? Everything all right?”

“Everything’s fine, thank you,” Jason sat down on his comfortable bed. “But I need some information. About Joe Moretti, the guy who stole the drone?”

“Yeah, *that* guy. As you may remember me telling you, I checked into his background when he moved here, but I found *squat*. That was really surprising, believe me.”

“Can you give me the date he came here?”

“I think I can. That’s not confidential. We have a file on all our residents. Hold on just a minute.”

Jason waited for what seemed like several minutes before Bill came back on the line. “I looked in the drawer where the file should be, but *there’s nothing there*,” Bill said finally. “I guess he never filled out a resident’s form when he moved here.”

“Then how did you get to know his name?”

“Must have been a complaint from another resident. That’s probably when I added his name and unit number to the resident list on the computer. And when I tried to research his background.”

“You don’t know when he moved in?”

“I see I made the computer entry two years ago, on February fourth. He must have arrived before that. In January, maybe.”

Jason’s eyes flickered to the blinking digital clock on his dresser that had not been reset since the last power outage. “That’s close enough, I guess. Do you at least have his photo? For an ID badge.”

“No, we don’t. It seems he never got one.”

Jason tried not to give in to the disappointment, but a sigh still escaped when he pressed his fingers against his closed eyelids. “Okay. No problem. My mom took a picture of him.”

“Anything else?”

“Nope. That’s it for now. Thanks.”

Jason was about to hang up when he heard Bill say, “Hold it a minute. Before you go...”

“Yeah?”

“You find out anything?”

“About?”

“About Moretti. You’ve been tailing him, right?”

“Not really. Should I be?”

“Maybe. I thought you would be...you know, doing your detective thing.”

“Well, right now I’m working on a way to find out when he’s at home and when he’s not. I’d like to follow him when he leaves to see where he goes. And maybe I could also go in there when he’s away.”

“Go in there...?”

“Go into his unit. You have a passkey to every unit at Heritage Hills, right?”

“No, I don’t. But anyway, you’ll need a search warrant to go in there.”

“Don’t you have a right to inspect any unit, for fire hazards or whatever?”

“Not when no one’s there.”

“You can’t sneak in then?”

“Not a chance. It’s illegal. Breaking and entering.”

Jason scooted to the edge of his bed and bounced one foot against the floor while he thought. “Okay, you’re right. I’m sorry. But I think there’s another way.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“I have a friend, Matt, whose father is a state policeman. He could help us to get a warrant.”

“You’ll need to show probable cause that Moretti’s committed a crime.”

“I think we have what we need.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It’s a long story. Too much to tell you right now.”

“Well, good luck with that. The judges are tough, you know.”

“We’ll see,” Jason said. “I’ll make sure you know as soon as I know if we can search the place.”

Chapter 27:

Jason hung up and dialed Chrissie's home number. "Chrissie, it's Jason." Although he had only known them for a full day, Jason was starting to like Chrissie and Tanja more and more and felt he could rely on them as trusted members of the little band of detectives. "I've got the approximate date when Moretti moved here."

"Approximate? Not exact?" Chrissie asked.

"No. He just sort of showed up and didn't tell anyone at the security office. They got wind of it, though, and added him to the list of residents in February, two years ago. They figure he moved here in January."

"Maybe that's good enough. Anyway, it'll have to do. We'll also need a photo of him. I made some calls and already found out who has the videos from the camera across the street from the Russian consulate. Guess who it is."

"The CIA?"

"No, FBI."

"The FBI? *They've* been watching the consulate?"

"Yeah. For years, it turns out. I talked with the agent in charge of the videocam and explained everything. He said he'd go through the recordings to look for our guy if we gave him a date and a photo."

"My mom took a photo of him walking into the consulate. It's pretty good. I'll send it to you. It shows his face."

"I'll text it to him with the date."

"How long do you think it will take for him to go through the two years of videos?"

“I think he’s *really* interested in our guy, Moretti. Seems they’ve been looking for a guy like him for some time. Said he’d get right on it, so it should be soon.”

“They must have a way to do it automatically with a computer. I can’t see some poor guy just sitting there fast-forwarding all those videos.”

Jason thanked her, hung up, and immediately called Matt’s mobile. “Matt, it’s me. Are you at home? Can you talk?”

“Yeah, sure. Answer’s ‘yes’ and ‘yes.’ What’s up?”

“Is your dad home?”

“No. Not yet. Why?”

“Chrissie’s working on finding out whether Moretti visited the consulate before last week. If it turns out he has, we might have grounds for a search warrant. Your dad could go into his unit with us to see what we can find.”

“Search warrant?”

“Yeah. I just talked to Bill Johnson. The security officer I told you about. He says he doesn’t have a passkey to get us in. We may need to break down the door.”

“Great! I’d like to see them smash his door. He deserves a lot worse.”

“That’s where you come in. Could you ask your dad to get the warrant? He’ll have to apply to a judge. He must have done it before.”

“Yeah. A hundred times, I’ll bet. Let me know what you find out from Chrissie, and I’ll ask him. Can’t promise anything. My dad’s really particular. Everything’s got to be by the book, if you know what I mean.”

“Whatever it takes,” Jason said. After saying goodbye, he hung up and pressed the number for Tanja’s mobile.

Chapter 28:

Tanja was Jason's age and, as twelve-year-old girls are sometimes, she was slender and lithe. She was also pretty, Jason thought. His objective was to make use of whatever special abilities Tanja might have as a member of the detective group. He thought of Tanja as the "Simone Biles" of the team—able to run fast, jump far, and climb high.

"Tanja, it's Jason." He recognized her soft voice when she said "hello."

"Hi, Jason. I was just thinking about you. I'm so happy you let Chrissie and me join you guys. I'm *psyched*."

"That's what I'm calling about. We're going to need you. I just want to know: Can you run?"

"Run?"

"Yeah, I mean run fast. Are you a runner?"

"Oh. Well, as a matter of fact, I am. I'm on the All-County track team. I'm the fastest sprinter in the junior division."

His eyes widened. *Impressive*. But he tried to keep his voice from gushing. "I thought you might be."

"You have a job for me?"

"No, not yet. But we will. You think you can run faster than our guy Joe Moretti?"

"I can run a lot faster than most grown-ups, unless they train."

"I doubt Moretti keeps in shape. As far as I can tell, he spends most of his day alone at home."

"Then no sweat. Pun intended."

“That’s good to know. When the team meets again, we’ll work out a plan to catch Moretti in the act. You’ll be our ‘Spiderman.’”

“Count me in. I’m game.”

“Thanks, Tanja.”

Jason said goodbye and made one more call, this time to Luke. He started by filling Luke in on the previous calls he’d made, and Luke listened without interruption.

When Jason finished telling him about his call to Tanja, Luke spoke only three words. “She’s smoking hot.”

“Yeah,” Jason replied. “She is.”

“Mostly Tanja,” Luke said, then added, “So what do we do now?”

“First, we wait till we hear back from the guy at the FBI. If it turns out Moretti is connected with the Russians in some way, Matt’s dad will apply to a judge for a search warrant. If he gets the warrant, we’ll go into Moretti’s condo unit with him and Officer Bill and look for evidence. We think Moretti’s got something to do with that missing journalist, Viktor somebody.

“In the meantime, I’d like you to make sure the drone is charged up. When they go in, we should have the drone in the air in case Moretti tries to run. If he doesn’t try to use his car, Tanja will be there to run after him.”

“Would you mind flying it? You’re the expert, not me.”

“I was going to follow the search party into Moretti’s unit, but I guess you and Matt can do that.”

“You think they’ll let us?”

“Officer Bill will go with them and he covers security for Heritage Hills, so I don’t see why not. I’m sure Matt can persuade his dad. Just remember to wear rubber gloves so you won’t leave fingerprints all over the place.”

“Will do. And I’ll bring two spare batteries for the drone, if it’s a go. I sure hope so. Nothing I’d like better than to see that guy’s face when we blast through his door. ‘Hello there. It’s Moretti time!’”

Chapter 29:

“Moretti Time,” the two-word phrase Luke used, soon became the name that Jason and the detectives used to mean “making a surprise entry into Moretti’s condo unit to execute a search warrant.” The young detectives were so excited with the prospect of crashing through Moretti’s front door that it was about all they talked about during the entire week when they got together after school.

That first evening, following his series of telephone calls, Jason and Amy sat at the dinner table with their parents, discussing the events of the day. Tom and Marjorie were eager to learn the details about their first day of school, but all Jason and Amy wanted to talk about was Moretti.

“Chrissie said the FBI seemed really interested in Moretti,” Jason said. “They’re going to search through two years of videos to see if he entered the Russian consulate.”

“I’ll bet they’ve already analyzed those videos to death,” Tom said, “and I’m sure they tried to identify everyone who’s gone in or come out. Maybe they just didn’t know who Moretti was or where he lived. You remember Officer Bill couldn’t find any background information on him? He just appeared out of the blue. Like he was living off the grid and then suddenly was here.”

“He must have come from *somewhere*,” Marjorie said. “If he was born in this country, there has to be a birth record. If he came from another country, the Immigration Department should have a record. One can’t just suddenly *show up*.”

Jason and Amy stared at their parents and then looked at each other. “It’s like he was born yesterday,” Amy commented. “So only his parents know about him and they’re not talking.”

“That’s not possible,” Marjorie said. “There’s always a doctor or a midwife to help with a birth. They would know, and they’d sign a birth certificate.”

“But he’s still like a brand-new baby,” Amy retorted. “And that gives me an idea. Instead of using Luke’s drone to watch Moretti, we could use a baby monitor. Chrissie can put it in her window aimed at Moretti’s unit. The best ones transmit images to the Internet. That way we could all see them on our phones.”

“Wow, that’s a *great idea*,” Jason said, becoming excited despite his calm, logical nature. “A *baby monitor*. That’s really the answer! How much does it cost? Can we buy one, Dad?”

“They’re pretty cheap now. Fifty bucks, maybe? I think it’s a terrific idea too. I’ll look into it and get you one if it seems like it might work and if it doesn’t bust our family budget.”

Jason turned to his younger sister. “I’ve got to admit it, Amy, you and your friends are turning out to be the best thing that ever happened to our little detective bureau.”

Amy smiled. “For once I agree with you, Jason. I’ve always wanted to work together with you on something. Something important like this.”

“Here’s an opportunity,” Tom said. “Why don’t you two put your heads together and work on solving the mystery. Try to figure out how Moretti managed to just ‘drop in’ to Heritage Hills without anyone knowing where he came from or how he got here.”

“That should be easy,” Amy said. “There are only three ways he could have come here: by car, a train or an airplane. Am I right?”

“He could have come by bus,” Jason added. “Buses go everywhere.”

“Yes, but unless he drove a car, he’d need to buy a ticket,” Amy reasoned. “The police could have found that out. If he drove, he’d need a driver’s license. The police could have checked that too.”

“Even Matt’s dad couldn’t find out anything about him,” Jason mused. “I tried too, and you know what I found? *Nothing*.”

“That’s so *weird*,” Amy said. “He couldn’t have just dropped out of the sky. There’s no way...” She rolled her eyes.

“But he came here. We know he did. But how?” Jason looked at his parents for help. “Magic?”

“Wait a minute.” Amy held up her right hand. “Maybe there’s another way... Suppose he came on a private plane? He wouldn’t need to buy a ticket.”

“Yes, but even private planes are carefully watched by the government,” Tom said. “There are rotating radar beams that scan the skies, like lighthouse beams that scan the seas.”

“But what if a plane flies really low? Can’t it fly under the radar beam?” Amy asked.

“Yes, it can,” Tom agreed. “But when a plane lands at an airport, the airport radar sees it.”

“So what if the radar sees the plane? It can’t know whose it is.”

“As a matter of fact, it can,” Jason told her. He’d read up on the ATCRBS – the Air Traffic Control Radar Beacon System – to satisfy his boyish curiosity. “Every airplane has a transponder that sends back an identifying code. And every plane has a license number on its tail. Whenever the pilot calls the airport tower, he has to give the tail number.”

“Do all airports have a tower?”

“Well, I don’t think so, but...”

“So what if a pilot landed at an airport without a tower? No one would know.”

“True, but all planes carrying passengers from another country have to land at an international airport so the passengers can go through customs,” Jason said. “All these airports have towers.”

“But what if a plane doesn’t land at an international airport? The plane’s passengers could sneak into the country, right?”

“I suppose. But remember the transponder code. The skies are monitored, as are the airports.”

“All airports are? Couldn’t someone have his own private airport?” Amy asked.

“I guess that’s possible, theoretically,” Tom replied. “In Wyoming maybe, but not around here.”

“I’ll bet all runways can be seen from a satellite. Like on Google Maps,” Amy persisted.

“You might see runways on Google. But not the aircraft.”

Jason, who had been quietly listening to Amy’s exchange with their dad, thought to himself, *Nice try, Amy.*

Chapter 30:

Losif Moretov was cleaning his gun in his home office when he heard a *ding* from his computer. He slid his desk chair over to face the computer and opened the secure app. What appeared, decrypted into Russian, were instructions for his next assignment. Losif read: *Package arrived. Pick up now.*

Losif immediately clicked out of the app and shut down his computer. He hurried downstairs, opened the door to his garage and pressed a button to raise the garage door. He climbed behind the wheel of his orange Subaru, started the engine, and quickly backed out. Within minutes he was on his way.

Negotiating the roads of Heritage Hills at a fast clip, he came to a main road, Warren Street, and turned right. He headed north up the hill to Putnam County, where Warren Street became Shindagen Hill Road, and followed Shindagen to the end. He turned left onto Union Valley Road, a quick right on Sandy Street, and then left again on Croton Falls Road, where he stayed until he reached the Mahopac Firehouse on Route 6. He turned right on Route 6, continuing north for three miles toward the Town of Carmel. At Belden Road he turned left, and then left again on Route 301, crossing Lovers Landing Bridge, and headed west along the West Branch Reservoir on the left and later the Boyd Corners Reservoir on the right. These huge reservoirs, some sixty miles north of New York City, were an important part of the City's vast water supply.

A few miles later, Route 301 took a sharp left turn, where it met Farmers Mills Road on the right. Moretov turned right onto Farmers Mills and headed northeast. Two miles later he turned due north on Dean Road, following it into Dutchess County, and shortly thereafter turned

left onto Hidden Acres Road. Because most of the roads he took were windy, secondary roads, the trip took nearly an hour, although, as the crow flies, his destination was no more than twenty miles away from Heritage Hills.

Hidden Acres Road was aptly named. Less than a mile in from its beginning at Dean Road, it narrowed and entered woods that were so dense they appeared to form a dark tunnel. Just before the start of the woods, on the right-hand side of the road, stood a yellow sign with large black letters that read ominously:

Private Property

No Trespassing

Violators will be Prosecuted

Moretov continued past the sign and into the woods, following the single lane which made a sudden ninety-degree turn to the south. After half a mile, the woods on his left gave way to scrub trees and bushes that revealed a large lake. A half mile further on, the woods returned on both sides, and the way forward became tunnel-like again, even darker than before. However, looking ahead on the narrow road, Moretov could see daylight, and a minute later he emerged into a large open clearing. Straight ahead of him stood a large steel aircraft hangar surrounded on all sides by a tarred surface.

To the left of the hangar, the tarmac led out through a gap in the woods to a runway, barely visible through the trees. On the far side of the tarmac stood a vintage twin-engine aircraft. It was a tail dragger, like a DC-3 but much smaller, and it looked as though it hadn't

flown in some time. Weeds grew up through cracks in the asphalt surface on which it stood, and its tires had leaked air over time and became nearly flat.

Moretov pulled up to a parking area in front of the building and switched off his engine. He pressed a button on his left side door, causing his tailgate to open. As he climbed out, a man dressed in a white shirt, gray suit and dark red tie emerged from the building, pushing a hand truck loaded with a large steel box.

“Is vaary heavy,” the man said with a strong Russian accent. “You vill need to haf help.”

No further words were spoken as the two men grabbed the handles, one on each side of the box, and hoisted the box into the back of the orange Subaru. The car sank half an inch on its springs from the added weight. Moretov pressed a button on the tailgate and it slowly closed. When he heard the *thunk* of the tailgate locking, he gave a brief nod to the other man, returned to the driver’s seat and sped away in the direction he had come.

Chapter 31:

Jason met with the other detectives the following Saturday at their secret hideout. He arrived with the baby monitor his dad had bought, and Luke brought his drone and the spare battery, both of which were fully charged, in the large heavy case. Amy brought her iPad, and, of course, they all brought their cell phones.

Jason was anxious to know if the FBI had seen Moretti entering or leaving the Russian consulate in New York and could thereby establish what they called a “Russian connection.” If so, there would be a question as to whether the FBI or the New York State Police would take the lead in obtaining a warrant to search Moretti’s home for evidence of criminality. Jason hoped that Matt’s dad could be involved in conducting the search, since it was more likely that he would allow Officer Bill, Matt, and perhaps the other young detectives to participate in “Moretti Time.”

After the usual “hellos” and a few brief minutes of friendly banter, the detectives got down to business. They all stared at Chrissie expectantly. “What?” She pretended not to understand, and then she smiled. “I know. I know. You want to hear if the FBI found anything. Right?”

“Absolutely,” Jason said, crossing his arms and hoping for some good news.

“Okay, okay,” she said. They told me a couple of things. First off, Moretti has been in and out of the consulate several times a month ever since he moved here. They don’t know what his job was, or is, but they’re working to piece that together—comparing the timing of his visits with any bad stuff they knew the Russian consulate was involved with.

“And second, they say his name isn’t really Joe Moretti. He’s Russian and his name is *Losif Moretov*. *Losif* is the Russian name for ‘Joseph.’ The must have made up the Italian name ‘Moretti’ because it’s close to Moretov in sound and it’s not Russian.”

Jason and the other detectives looked at one another, astounded. Everyone realized at once they just might have enough evidence to obtain a search warrant. And if they were able to get it, instead of “Moretti Time,” the search would be called “Moretov Time.”

“Looks like a go,” said Matt. “I’ll tell my dad. He can follow up with the FBI. They can work together on the application for a search warrant.”

“I’ll call Officer Bill and tell him,” Jason said. “If we get the warrant, we’re going in.”

“You brought the baby monitor,” Amy reminded Jason. “You should show them.”

“Baby monitor?” Tanja asked. “What’s that for?”

“We can use it to watch Moretti...um, I mean *Moretov*. From Chrissie’s window.”

“Really?” Chrissie asked. “What do I have to do?”

“You won’t have to do anything. It’ll transmit a live video of Moretov’s front door to the Internet, and from there, everyone who has the app can keep watch.”

“*Open the box*,” Luke said excitedly. “And let’s try it out.”

“It won’t work out here,” Tanja pointed out, “because there’s no Internet.”

“Oh... *Duh*. Anyway, if it works in Chrissie’s window, she won’t need my drone. We can use the drone to follow Moretov wherever he’s going.”

“Amy came up with the idea,” Jason said with an appreciative nod to his sister. “Let’s give her a high five.”

They all reached over and slapped her right hand.

“Aww, shucks, guys.” Amy smiled while feigning embarrassment.

“Jason, I want you to take the drone now so you’ll have it,” said Luke. “If they search his home, we’ll want the drone in the air. Matt, hopefully you can go in there with your dad and that security officer. I’m content to stay outside with the rest of our group, watching what he does.”

“Then I guess we’re all ready.” Jason looked around to see if anyone had anything to add. When no one did, he raised his right fist and shouted, “*Moretov Time!*” The others grinned and followed his lead.

Chapter 32:

Moretov drove home with the heavy “package” in his trunk. He had no idea what was in it or what it was for, but he would find that out soon enough. He knew that, as a professional assassin under direct orders from the Russian SVR, he would receive explicit instructions as to its use.

As he entered his cluster in Heritage Hills, he activated the controller clipped to his visor and the garage door rose slowly. He pulled into the garage and pressed a button to raise the car’s tailgate. He then quickly got out and touched a controller on the wall of the garage.

* * * *

Jason leaned closer to the iPad screen as Moretov’s garage door slowly descended. For a brief instant, the tailgate lifted just enough for the baby monitor in Chrissie’s window to capture the contents of the car’s trunk before the garage door dropped to conceal it. The video images obtained were instantly flashed to all those who had the monitor app.

“What was that?” Jason asked, pointing to the image on Amy’s iPad screen of the thing in Moretov’s trunk. By the time Amy had a chance to look, all she could see was the closed garage door.

“What?” she asked.

“A big gray box in the trunk of his car.”

“I missed it. Are you recording this?”

“No. But maybe someone else did. I’ll find out.” Jason grabbed his cell phone and sent a quick text to the other four detectives. *Did you see Moretov on the monitor today?*

Within a minute he received four answers, with Chrissie and Matt replying “yes” but the other two saying they weren’t watching.

He wrote back to Matt, asking if he saw the open trunk of Moretov’s car.

Yeah, Matt replied. Saw a steel case in there. Really huge.

Tell me you have a recording... Jason held his breath, hoping the answer was “yes.”

Course. Started recording soon as he drove up.

Send it to me? Jason texted.

Sure. Send it to everyone?

Yeah. Show your dad too. Might help for the search warrant.

Doubt that. Just a big box. Can’t tell what’s in it.

* * * *

Moretov entered his home from the garage through the side door and quickly walked upstairs to his office. He sat down at the computer, typed in a few brief commands on his Cyrillic keyboard, and pressed “enter.” An email template appeared on his screen and he typed a message.

Package received. Awaiting instructions.

After pressing “send,” he went downstairs to his kitchen and opened the refrigerator. It was already late morning, and he could either make himself breakfast or lunch. When he saw the egg caddy, he decided to make a big breakfast. He was hungry.

He took out three eggs, a tomato, a small container of mushrooms, and a ham shank wrapped in aluminum foil. He placed them on the kitchen counter and set to work. He diced a handful of the mushrooms, cut the tomato in half, and sliced off a slab from the ham shank. He arranged these separately on a large frying pan and set it on the stove to warm them. Next, he set about frying the three eggs, sunny side up, with a low enough heat to avoid burning the whites while the yolks were cooking.

When done, he plated his meal and brought it over to the kitchen table. He was just about to enjoy his Russian breakfast when he heard his cell phone *ding*.

Seeing a message announcing an encrypted email, he ran upstairs and sat down again at the computer. After typing a few commands, he waited patiently for the computer to decrypt the incoming message and display the cleartext.

The message read, *Deliver immediately to UN Mission.*

Without so much as a bite of his breakfast, Moretov hurried out to his garage, pressed the controller on the wall to open the garage door, slipped into the driver’s seat of his copper-colored car and backed the vehicle out.

As he drove through the labyrinth of roads in Heritage Hills and headed for the front entrance that led to the main highway, he entered into his dashboard navigator the address of the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations—*136 East 67 Street, New York, NY*.

Chapter 33:

As soon as Moretov left, a sleek silver sedan backed out of the garage opposite his unit and followed him toward the front entrance.

“Stay back, Mom,” Chrissie said. “We don’t want him to see us.”

Chrissie’s mom drove a safe distance behind the odd colored car. Once they left the town of Somers, the traffic was light. They remained several cars behind on the two-lane road but could easily see if Moretov turned off somewhere.

They followed Moretov south on Route 100. By the time they reached Millwood twenty minutes later, they were fairly sure he was heading for New York City.

“I’ll bet it’s the Russian consulate again,” Chrissie said. “He’s been there a hundred times. They should give him a room there.”

“He should live in New York City at least. What’s he doing in Heritage Hills?”

Moretov turned left onto the Taconic. Chrissie pointed. “Look there, Mom. He’s heading to the City for sure.”

They followed Moretov south on the Taconic State Parkway, then the Saw Mill River Parkway, and eventually the New York State Thruway, which became the Major Deegan Expressway in the Bronx. As they expected, Morotov took the Willis Avenue Bridge exit off the Major Deegan and crossed over the Harlem River into Manhattan. Right after the bridge he turned south again onto the FDR Drive and exited at Ninety-first Street. Chrissie’s mom had to hurry to keep up in the bustling Manhattan traffic.

Driving west on Ninety-first, they lost sight of the orange car. Chrissie’s mom looked ahead frantically. “Uh-oh. I can’t see his car.”

“Don’t worry,” Chrissie replied. “The consulate’s on this street, just before Central Park.”

“But I don’t see him. Did he turn off?”

“He must be ahead of these cars,” Chrissie said, but she looked left as they crossed Second Avenue. “There he is! Go left! Go left!” she shouted.

Chrissie’s mom made an abrupt left turn across the left-hand lane, cutting off another car that made itself known by honking loudly. She ignored the angry driver and turned south on Second Avenue.

They sped along for several blocks until Chrissie spied Moretov’s orange car waiting for the light to change. “*There he is.* The next block!”

“*Whew.* We almost lost him. I’ll try to catch up and stay close now.”

At Sixty-seventh Street, Moretov turned right, with Chrissie and her mom close behind. He stopped for the red light at Third Avenue and then continued on before pulling up to the curb on the left in the middle of the next block, in front of a rather plain-looking building. Gray and unadorned, it looked like it could house offices or residential apartments, or perhaps both. The building had a covered entranceway that extended out to the street.

Chrissie noticed a plaque on the wall to the left of the main door as they drove past, but cars blocked most of her view, and she couldn’t read the words. Seeing an open space at the far end of the street, she pointed. “Stop there.”

Her mom continued on, past a firehouse and a police station to the right, and pulled into the space on the left. It turned out to be a space for a fireplug. “I can’t stop here,” she said.

“Stay in the car. I’m going to walk back there to see what’s going on.” Chrissie quickly opened the door and slipped out.

“You sure he’s never seen you before?”

“I’m positive, Mom.”

Chrissie closed the car door and started walking, briskly at first, but she slowed as she approached Moretov’s car. Moretov was standing near the open rear deck, watching as two burly men lifted the heavy box from the trunk and carried it into the building. Chrissie slipped her phone out of her pants pocket and pretended to make a call. Before putting the phone to her ear, she selected the camera app and silently snapped a photo of the orange car with Moretov standing behind it. As she walked past the building, she looked over and read the plaque near the door.

Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations

She secretly snapped a photo of that too.

Chapter 34:

On the way home, Chrissie phoned Jason and asked that he call a meeting of the detectives. She also texted him the photos she took of Moretov and the plaque near the entrance of the building, which not only bore the name of the Russian UN Mission but also the phrase *Permanent Mission of the Republic of Belarus to the UN* below it, which was in the same building.

“Send these photos to the others before the meeting,” she said. “I’ll tell everyone what’s going on when I get there.”

“When do you want to meet?”

“Set the meeting for four o’clock. At the hideout. That will give me plenty of time to get home.”

Chrissie ended the call and looked over at her mom. “Thanks, Mom,” she said simply.

“For what?”

“For following Moretov. For dropping everything and jumping into the car when I asked you to. And for supporting me and my friends.”

“That’s what mothers do. You should know that.”

“Yes, I do. But mothers are not all the same.”

“Well, that is true. But for me it’s easy. I just follow my heart.”

“Still...”

“There’s nothing I’d rather do, Chrissie. *You* are my heart, whatever you’re doing and wherever you go.”

“Yes, Mom,” Chrissie said dryly. Her mom could be oversentimental at times, she thought. Instead of replying, she looked at her cell phone and dialed another number. When the call was answered, she introduced herself.

“Hello. My name’s Chrissie Ziegler. I’d like to speak with Special Agent Frank Abate.” She pronounced the “e” at the end of “Abate” like the “i” in “Moretti.” After a moment he came on the line.

“Agent Abate...” His voice was clipped, as if he was in a hurry.

“I spoke to you before. About a guy named Losif Moretov? I’m Chrissie Ziegler.”

“Yes, I know. I just saw you in the video feed. Outside the Russian Mission to the UN.”

“You were watch...There was a camera?”

“Across the street from the building. Second story of the firehouse. We have one at the police station too, aimed at the street.”

“Oh.” Chrissie thought a moment before speaking. “Then you must have seen Moretov delivering the steel box. Looked really heavy. It took two big men to carry it.”

“Yes, I did. Can you tell me what you were doing there?”

“My mother and I followed him from his home in Somers. We live just across the street from his unit, remember?”

“You shouldn’t do that again. We believe Moretov is dangerous.”

“You do?” Chrissie replied, feigning ignorance, although she and her detective friends had their own suspicions. “Why do you say that?”

“I’m not at liberty to say, but trust me. You should stay away. I tell you, he’s been careful not to leave evidence of what he’s been doing.”

“My friend Jason flew a drone over his condo and saw a strange antenna on his roof.”

“*What?* Really? I didn’t know that.”

“Not only that. He flew it *inside* his unit. He saw a two-way radio, what looked like a fancy computer, and an arsenal of guns and ammo.”

“*What?* He flew a drone *inside*?”

“Oh, there’s more. Much, much more. He’s been monitoring him.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? We’ve been watching this guy for some time, but he’s still a mystery to us. We don’t know much about him, except that he seems to be there whenever a political opponent of Vladimir Putin *disappears*. Like the missing journalist, Viktor Ivanov. Moretov was at the Russian consulate when Ivanov went in to renew his passport.”

“You should really talk to Jason. Do you want to meet him?”

“Absolutely. And the sooner the better.”

“He’s meeting with us—our group of detectives—this afternoon. Four o’clock. At Heritage Hills.”

Chrissie gave Abate directions to the hideout at the top of the West Hill.

“I’ll be there.”

Chapter 35:

Jason telephoned Officer Bill to invite him to the meeting, and Bill immediately accepted. He offered to pick up Jason and Amy on his way to the hideout and drive them up the hill to Recreation Area 2. He parked there at a quarter to four, and they entered the pavilion together.

Matt and Luke arrived next, accompanied by Matt's father, Jim, the state police officer. Officer Jim assisted Luke in lugging the box with his drone, which Jason could fly if and when they needed an "eye in the sky."

Chrissie and Tanja arrived minutes later with Special Agent Frank Abate in tow. They met at Rec Area 2 and walked up together. As soon as he saw them coming, Jason ran down to meet them. As the leader of the young group of detectives, he was anxious to meet and get to know FBI Agent Abate.

"Boy, this Heritage Hills is *some place*," remarked Frank as they climbed the long steep steps and continued up on the path past the two big water tanks. "Everywhere you look there's lawn, flowers, and trees. You hardly notice the buildings. Compared to the City, it's an oasis."

"You get *so* used to it," Tanja replied. "After a while it gets *boring*."

"Do you live in the City?" asked Chrissie, trying to change the subject from what she knew was Tanja's pet peeve.

"It goes with the job," Frank answered. "I have to live close to the office and be ready to go to work at a moment's notice."

“You have all those restaurants, shops, and museums. The culture, and *Broadway*. So many things to do. I’m *so* envious,” Tanja remarked, and after a beat she added, “When I finish college, I’m going to move there.”

“Think twice before you do. It’s not so nice as it may seem. We have more than our share of crime. I’m sure there’s none at all around here.”

“None at all? Then what are we doing here? Having a picnic?” Chrissie remarked with more than a hint of sarcasm.

“No, you’re absolutely right. We’re looking at some serious stuff. And if this Moretov is who we think he is, we’ll want to take him down.”

“We’re here to help,” Jason said. “We have information that may be of use to you.”

When they finally reached the hideout, Jason and Chrissie introduced Special Agent Frank Abate to Amy, Matt and Luke. Chrissie had never met Matt’s father or the security officer, but they stepped forward, first Jim and then Bill, to introduce themselves and shake Frank’s hand. They then all took their seats at the picnic table.

Frank was cordial but reserved at first, not revealing what he thought of the gathering. Without waiting for the young detectives to fill him in, he spoke first, looking directly at Jim and Bill.

“Before we start,” he began, “I just want to make something clear: The FBI is in charge here. I’ll listen to all of you, but don’t expect to be kept entirely in the loop. Understood?”

“No, it’s *not*,” Jim replied, oddly vehement for the polite conversation. “The New York State Police are in charge of this area. We work closely with the Heritage Hills security force, which is the reason Bill’s here.”

“Jim is right,” Bill said. “As a matter of fact, I’ve already spoken to Moretti...I mean Moretov, several times. Jason and the other young people here set up a system to monitor his comings and goings.”

“When the FBI takes a case, it trumps local law enforcement,” Frank explained firmly but respectfully. “We’ve been aware of Moretov for some time now. I’m asking you to back off.”

“Can’t we work together?” Bill remarked, clearly taken aback by the rebuff. “Jim and I are experienced in law enforcement, and we know the territory. Why does there have to be a turf war?”

“Because the FBI needs to operate independently and without interference. I’m sorry, but this is exclusively our show now.”

“You need to keep us informed so we can do our jobs.”

“Not necessarily. I’ll tell you what you need to know. That’s it.”

Jason and his young friends remained silent while listening to this exchange. They eyed each other knowingly, indicating their disagreement with Frank and their support for Jim and Bill.

Chapter 36:

“For now, I want you to tell me what you know about Moretov. I want any and all information you have that leads you to suspect he’s committed a crime. If I think the information’s sufficient to obtain a no-knock warrant to search his home, I’ll present it to a judge.”

For a long moment no one responded to Frank. Jason glanced at the others and, seeing no one else was about to say anything, took the opportunity to speak. “I first saw him when I was flying Luke’s drone. Moretov was firing a rifle at a shooting range about a mile from here.”

“A shooting range? Near here?” Frank asked, somewhat incredulously.

“Yes,” Bill chimed in. “It’s in Putnam County, just over the line from Westchester. They do things differently up there.”

“Differently?”

“Let’s just say Putnam’s politically ‘red.’ Folks there really like guns. Here in Westchester, not so much.”

“Hmm. Then I’m surprised Moretov doesn’t live there.”

“Actually, this is a pretty good place to hide in plain sight. If you keep to yourself, no one even notices you’re here,” Bill said.

“Come to think of it, I didn’t spot a single person when I drove in this place. It’s weirdly quiet. You’re inside some kind of a bubble.”

“There’s no place you can walk to,” Jim said. “You need a car. But there’s a minibus that can take you into Somers or to the railroad station.”

“Moretov’s car is pretty easy to spot. It’s orange-looking,” Jason commented. “My mom saw it pull up to the Russian consulate and Chrissie’s mom followed it to their UN Mission.”

“So what have we got then? Why do we think Moretov’s a suspect in killing that *New York Times* journalist?”

“We know he has an arsenal at home,” Matt explained. “Like Jason said, he practices shooting.”

“I think he has a two-way radio,” Jason added. “He has all kinds of radio equipment in his office and an antenna on his roof.”

“You saw his office?”

“Well, yeah. I flew Luke’s drone around inside his home.”

“Did Moretov let you in?”

“Well, no, but...”

“Breaking and entering? You know that’s against the law, right? Whatever you think you saw, it’s best to get a warrant to do a thorough search in his home. Do you guys have anything else?” Frank looked at Jason and then the other members of the young detective team. They all sat or stood there and said nothing.

“That does it, then,” Jim said. “No evidence, no warrant. I guess we’re done.”

“We can all go home,” Bill commented and got up from the table. Jim did also.

Chrissie, appearing somewhat embarrassed for having brought everyone together, stayed sitting. To her young colleagues, she said, “Let’s stay put for a moment and talk about this.”

Chapter 37:

As the grown-ups were leaving, Chrissie's cell phone chimed. She looked at it and answered, "Hi, Mom."

As she listened with the phone to her ear, her eyes widened and her face flushed. She ended the call and stared at her friends. "It's Moretov. He's loading suitcases in his car. It looks like he's leaving."

Jason sprung up in an attempt to alert the three men, but they had already disappeared down the hill. "We need to follow him," he said.

"My mom's coming back to get us," Chrissie said. "If we jump in her car, we can tail him."

"My drone!" Luke reminded everyone. "I can't leave it here. And it's heavy. Help me carry it."

Jason and Matt grabbed the handles on both sides and lifted. Luke protested, "You don't have to carry it for me. Just help!" Jason and Matt ignored him and carried the heavy box down the hill. By the time they reached the parking lot down below, Chrissie's mom was there with her car, waiting. She got out and opened the trunk, and the two boys set the box inside.

Within a minute they were on their way, speeding toward Moretov's unit, with Chrissie and Tanja squeezed into the front passenger seat and with the three boys, and Amy on Jason's lap, in the back. As they neared their destination, they saw Moretov pulling out of the cul-de-sac in his copper-colored Subaru SUV.

"There he is! He's *leaving*," Chrissie pointed through the windshield at the car as it turned away from them. "Follow him, Mom!"

“Don’t worry. He can’t get away.” Chrissie’s mom gripped the wheel tighter and stared straight ahead, her eyes fixed on Moretov’s fast moving SUV. All the young people grabbed hold to brace themselves for what they anticipated could be a wild ride. When the car ahead left the cul-de-sac, it turned left and accelerated rapidly, apparently heading toward the side entrance of Heritage Hills that exited on Route 202.

“He’ll know we’re following him, but it doesn’t matter,” Tanja almost shouted. “What could he do? Shoot at us?”

“I’ll bet he’s running away,” Jason said from the back seat, holding tight to Amy. “The question is where is he going?”

“We’re going to find out,” Chrissie’s mom said through gritted teeth, her eyes laser-focused on the car ahead.

Although he was in the back seat with Amy on his lap, Jason could see Moretov was now aware he was being followed. His SUV accelerated and sped even faster along the Heritage Hills road, which had a speed limit of thirty. He passed a sign announcing a speed bump but didn’t slow down and took the bump going sixty. With a *whump*, so loud that Jason could hear it, his car bounced wildly and almost lost traction, but it kept going. The car slowed abruptly for a second speed bump shortly beyond.

Chrissie’s mom braked sharply before the speed bumps but then accelerated quickly after each one so she didn’t lose much ground. She followed the SUV as the road wound down the hill and up the other side.

“Don’t lose him, Mom!” Chrissie shouted.

“I’m not about to,” her mom replied between her teeth. From the back seat, Jason could see her holding the steering wheel so tightly he thought it might break apart. “But his car’s a lot

lighter than ours,” she added. “Once we get away from Heritage Hills with these twisting roads, we should do better.”

Moretov’s SUV braked briefly at the stop sign before entering Route 202, then turned north on the main road. Chrissie’s mom followed him, but her turn onto 202 was delayed momentarily by two cars heading south. When she was finally able to make the turn, Moretov was already far ahead and about to disappear around a bend. Jason held his breath as she pressed the pedal to the metal and their car slowly accelerated.

Luckily, the traffic light at Croton Falls Road was red and cars were crossing 202, requiring Moretov to stop. By the time the light turned green, Chrissie’s mom could see his car in the distance and, at seventy miles per hour, was closing in fast. Without slowing down, she followed Moretov through the light, which changed to yellow as she passed through. She had nearly caught up with him when he turned left on Stoneleigh Avenue. She braked hard and barely made the turn, first sharp left and then right, but the wheels held and she ended up a football field’s length behind Moretov, going fifty.

Everyone remained silent in the chase car as Chrissie’s mom sped dangerously along the back roads of Putnam County, doing her best to keep up with Moretov but sometimes falling behind. Miraculously, Moretov had to stop at the occasional traffic light and slow down for several stop signs, and several times he got caught behind a slow-moving van or car and in one case a dump truck, which helped considerably. When he was able to overtake the vehicles on a straightaway, Chrissie’s mom was able to do so too.

Jason hadn’t been paying attention enough to know where they were or where they might be going, and he guessed neither of the others knew either. They just fixated on Moretov’s copper-colored Subaru SUV and hoped their wild ride would come to an end sooner rather than

later. The ride was harrowing, and it was dangerous, but they all felt committed to following him. They would try to keep up with the person they were quite sure was a “bad guy.” If at all possible, they would prevent him from doing what they all knew would be a grave injustice—namely, eluding the grip of the hand at the end of the long arm of the law. If he managed to escape to Russia, well... He’d be out of the arm’s reach. If he was the one who had killed Ivanov, he’d have committed murder with impunity.

So it was not without some relief on their part when Moretov suddenly braked and turned left off the main road. Looking for landmarks, Jason saw a sign for “Dean Road” as their vehicle turned to follow his. Moretov drove, still at high speed, for nearly a mile and turned left again onto a country lane paved with gravel, not macadam, and appropriately called “Hidden Acres Road.”

“Do we even know where we are right now?” Jason asked Chrissie’s mom.

She shook her head. “No idea.”

The road was fairly straight and level, but it plunged forward into dense woods with huge trees on either side. They pressed on. Because the tree canopy blocked the sunlight from reaching down through the trees, the road was dark and forbidding.

Up ahead, a yellow sign on the right side of the road warned:

Private Property

No Trespassing

Violators will be Prosecuted

Moretov kept on going. Ignoring the sign, Chrissie’s mom followed him into the woods.

A minute later they came to an open area cleared of trees and covered with a well-kept lawn. A huge barnlike structure loomed in the distance. A sleek executive jet aircraft stood waiting, facing away to the left. The aircraft had no visible markings except for its tail number and the small image of a Russian flag.

An attractive female, apparently a flight attendant, judging by her outfit, stood in an open hatch on the threshold of a stairway leading down to the grass below. A male attendant, dressed in all black, stood on the ground near the bottom of the stairway. A holster with a pistol was at his side and he held a long gun across his chest.

“We’d better stop here,” Jason said with concern in his voice. “They’ve got guns!”

“OMG! Stop, Mom!” Chrissie shouted, and her mom instantly braked to a stop. They all watched as Moretov drove straight toward the aircraft and pulled up next to the stairway. He got out of the orange SUV, quickly ran around to the back, and opened the hatch. He grabbed his travel bag and brought it over to the stairway. The attendant took it from him and, seemingly without effort, heaved it up to the female attendant in the plane.

Only then did Moretov glance over his shoulder and look at the car filled with his pursuers. He grinned and ran up the stairs and disappeared through the hatch.

Chapter 38:

Chrissie grabbed her cell phone from her purse and called Frank. He picked up immediately, and she put it on speaker.

“Hello, Chrissie,” he said. “I know why you’re calling. We’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Wha...? You will?”

“Yes. We followed Matt’s phone. You’re at the Black Pond airstrip.”

Jason issued a quiet sigh of relief in Amy’s ear. Amy’s weight on Jason’s lap for the past half hour was finally getting to him, making him feel somewhat claustrophobic, though there was not much he could do about it. He was just glad to hear that their adventurous journey was finally reaching its end.

“We are? We haven’t seen any airport. Or any pond, for that matter.”

“The airstrip’s on your left. Beyond that is Black Pond,” Frank said.

“I still don’t see it. There’s a lot of trees...”

“It’s there. Trust me. Where’s Moretov?”

“He just got on a jet plane. They’re closing the hatch. They’re *leaving!*”

Jason watched through the windshield in horror as the plane began moving slowly off to the left. It looked like it was heading directly into the trees, but he assumed there was an opening.

“What do we do?” Chrissie said.

“If the hatch is closed, they won’t fire on you. At least you’re safe. But we’re still several minutes out. I don’t see any way to prevent their taking off.”

“I’m so sorry. Can’t anyone think of something?”

“No, we’re going to lose him. We’re coming as quickly as we can, but...”

“I’ll head him off,” shouted Chrissie’s mom. She pressed the accelerator to the floor and the car leaped forward. She aimed straight for the aircraft, which was just passing through an opening in the trees.

“I heard that!” Frank said through the loudspeaker of Chrissie’s phone. “Do *not* interfere with that aircraft. These Russians are *dangerous*!”

“Then what do we do?” Chrissie’s mom screamed frantically, braking the car to a stop.

“The *drone*!” shouted Jason from the back seat. He opened the side door so he and Amy could get out, and he ran around to the trunk. “Luke, let’s use the drone to stop him!”

In an instant, all the other passengers piled out of the car. Luke followed Jason to the back, where he had already opened the trunk lid and was tugging on the box that held the drone. Luke helped him raise the box and set it down on the grass. Luke opened the box and grabbed the drone controller. “I’ll turn the drone on, but you fly it, Jason,” he said, passing the controller to Jason. “You’re much better than me.”

“Okay. I’ll fly,” Jason agreed, fishing his phone out of his pocket and attaching it to the cradle on the controller. “But you know, Moretov hates this thing. Right? He’s tried twice to shoot it down.”

“Yeah, but he *missed*. I trust you to bring this thing home in one piece. You’re that good at flying.” Luke lifted the drone from its case and pressed a button on its side to turn it on. He set the device down on the grass and shouted, “Go get him, Jason!”

Using the controller, Jason started the six propellers whirring and the drone lifted off. Turning his attention to the cell phone screen in front of him, he brought the drone up, up, up until it was above the trees and rotated slowly, viewing the landscape and sighting the aircraft.

"I'm *flying*," he said to himself, and for a brief moment he couldn't take his eyes off the beautiful countryside. He found himself, once again, floating high in the air. The feeling was exhilarating. Breathtaking. He was one with the drone. He *was* the drone.

As he scanned the horizon, he was surprised to see a large dark-water lake beyond the trees toward the east. The lake appeared pristine, untouched and unspoiled by the appearance of man. There was not a single boat or lakeside home that he could see.

He flew in that direction to get a better view and was shocked by what he saw when he crested the trees. Below him, extending northward into the lake, was a long, narrow peninsula. Appearing to be man-made, the strip of land was arrow-straight, and its width hardly varied from end to end. It was covered with blacktop and was thus seemingly a road to nowhere, but Jason realized immediately it was an airstrip.

Looking south to where the peninsula protruded from the shore, Jason saw a gap in the trees that bordered the lake. In that gap stood the jet aircraft that was about to carry Moretov away and out of the country. He zoomed over in that direction and saw the aircraft inch forward toward the airstrip. As it taxied through the gap in the trees, it gained speed for a moment and then halted briefly and began to rotate to the left to line up with the airstrip.

There was not a second to lose. The FBI was still several minutes away from arriving. If they came in time, they could prevent the aircraft from leaving and arrest Moretov, but right now, it was up to Jason to delay its departure. However, there was not much that a little drone could do to stop a full-sized jet aircraft.

Jason's first thought was to fly straight into one of the aircraft's jet engines in hopes that it would break up the internal fans of the turbine and cause the engine to fail. But even if that worked, Jason had heard that a twin-engine jet plane could fly with only one engine. Yet the

plane might—just might—have difficulty taking off from a standstill on the ground since the length of the runway was somewhat limited.

Jason frantically searched his mind for a plan B. Not only was the outcome of his first idea uncertain, but he also didn't own the drone. It wasn't his to crash. It was Luke's!

All he needed to do, he thought, was to delay the plane's takeoff until the FBI arrived. Five or ten minutes, tops, he thought. But how?

He scanned the plane quickly for something—anything—he could do that would keep it on the ground. It was a David and Goliath story, the only difference being that the contestants were man-made and mechanical: His small drone was going to do battle with a huge machine.

The plane had a smooth white outer surface that seemed impenetrable. Jason flew closer to the front of the big long tube and saw the pilot's head through the side window. He was hunched over, apparently looking at the instrument panel, and because of that, he didn't notice the drone. He was speaking to someone through his headset, probably reporting he was ready for takeoff. It was now or never.

In a final quick and desperate look at the aircraft, Jason noticed a number of probes protruding from the plane's top surface and its belly. *They must be antennas*, he thought and flew closer to examine the ones on the bottom. He saw a few other protrusions of various designs and shapes, including a tiny tube sticking out with an elbow that faced forward. He homed in and bumped up against it, causing it to flatten and bend over. He didn't know if that was having any effect or if the probe was in any way critical to the operation of the aircraft, but he did the same to two other protrusions that weren't so protected against an attack by the drone. He smashed them both.

Jason suddenly heard the airplane's engines wind up, making a whine that increased in intensity and pitch until it became a deafening scream. The plane remained stationary for a moment,

then began to move forward, slowly at first, then faster and faster until it was flying down the runway at breakneck speed. Jason and his drone watched as the plane lifted off and ascended into the sky, rising higher and higher and banking to the right to fly away in the direction of its destination, wherever that might be.

Jason felt deflated. He and his friends, who had now surrounded him in support, had tried so hard to stop Moretov from escaping, but they had failed. Moretov was on his way to freedom and there was nothing they could do about it. In the drone, he hovered in the air, watching the murderer flee in a private jet that was disappearing into the sunset. It was all he could do to keep from breaking into tears as he brought the drone in for a safe landing.

In the distance, on the other side of the trees, a car headed toward the airstrip. Jason knew it was Special Agent Frank Abate, arriving too late to arrest the man from Heritage Hills who had been hiding in plain sight and at the same time had probably killed at least two people on US soil. He was a hitman, plain and simple.

Jason watched and waited as three police cars arrived: a black car marked “FBI,” a dark blue car marked “New York State Police,” and a white car marked “Security.” They stopped on the nearby lawn and three men stepped out, the first of them bearing a black vest with “FBI” emblazoned in white letters, both in front and back. The other two were recognized immediately: Matt’s dad, Jim, and Officer Bill.

It was too late now, Jason thought. They might as well turn around and go back. Moretov was on his way to safety, wherever that was. Jason looked far into the distance in the direction the aircraft had left to catch a final glimpse of the faint object.

As he watched, trying to focus on the tiny speck in the sky, the object seemed to be getting bigger, not smaller. He couldn't be sure, but as he gazed into the distance it became clearer.

It was an airplane of some kind. It couldn't possibly be the one that just left. That craft was fleeing the area and had no reason to return. Yet flights to and from this airstrip were rare, which was why Moretov had used it as his means of escape.

It was only when the aircraft entered a landing pattern, moving counterclockwise around the landing strip, that Jason caught a glimmer of hope. The plane looked the same, but it had no markings other than a tail number, which he could not make out in the distance. It continued its approach and headed in his direction as it lowered itself, sinking slowly and eventually touching down at the far end of the runway. Slowing, the aircraft finally braked to a stop right in front of him. Jason looked and saw the tail number was identical to the one on the plane that had left. It had returned!

FBI Special Agent Frank, standing at the ready with officers Jim and Bill, swarmed the aircraft, their guns out and pointed. The hatch on the side of the plane dropped, forming the short ramp with stairs, and in the opening stood Moretov, glowering down at the officers.

"Show us your hands," shouted Frank. Clearly, he was the one in charge.

Moretov stood motionless for a moment, as if deciding whether to comply, then slowly raised both hands.

Frank stepped up the steep ramp and cuffed the man's hands together behind his back. "You're under arrest" was all he said. Nothing more.

Jason, who had been watching all this unfold, picked up the drone and walked back to the car where Chrissie's mom, Chrissie, Amy, Tanja, Matt, and Luke were standing. He set the little craft down into the soft grass behind the car and handed the controller to Luke.

Chapter 39:

The next morning, Special Agent Frank called Chrissie and offered to meet everyone and answer any and all questions about what had happened the day before. It was decided to meet in Jason's home at seven that very evening. Frank said he'd "drop everything" and drive up.

By seven, Jason's home was filled with family and friends, buzzing with anticipation. They were all anxious to hear what Frank had to say.

Jason checked the window again — no sign of Frank yet. His mind kept replaying the moment the plane circled back and the shocking arrest that followed. It was still unclear what exactly they'd stumbled into.

When Frank's car finally pulled into the driveway, Jason exchanged a glance with his sister, silently communicating how surreal this felt.

FBI Special Agent Frank rang the bell and Marjorie opened the door. As he stepped in, he greeted all that were there: Marjorie, Tom, and their two children, Jason and Amy; State Police Officer Jim and his son, Matt; Luke's dad, who'd purchased the drone, and his son, Luke; Chrissie's mom and her daughter, Chrissie; Tanja's mom and her daughter, Tanja; and significantly, Heritage Hills Security Officer Bill. They were all eager to hear what Frank had to say.

After the introductions all around and the offerings of coffee, tea, glasses of water and soda, Frank took charge of the room. He respectfully declined Marjorie's offer of coffee in his haste to address the assembled group. All eyes were on him as he was about to speak when Amy raised her hand. He looked at her, trying not to show annoyance, and nodded.

“Can I record everything?” she asked meekly.

“I’d rather you didn’t,” Frank said. “Some of this is considered, well... ‘secret.’”

“Oh.” Amy dropped her gaze. Others muttered but otherwise kept silent.

“Let me start by telling you: You’ve done your country an enormous service,” Frank told them. “Until you came forward and identified this man who called himself ‘Joe Moretti,’ we had no idea who he was or where he came from. We’d seen him come and go from Russian government buildings, both the consulate and the U.N. Mission, but never suspected he was any kind of a threat. We surmised he’d come from abroad, maybe Russia but just as likely Chechenia or maybe even Iran, but that was all. And we didn’t know where he lived.

“We were watching both the Russian Mission to the UN and the Russian consulate in New York, and believed something was afoot. The Russian Embassy in Washington was quiet. It seemed to have no part in this, so we focused our attention here. People came and went, but we couldn’t identify them all. Particularly this guy, Joe Moretti, appeared to come out of nowhere.

“That pricked our interest, but we couldn’t get a handle on the man. He kept a low profile—just an ‘average Joe’ we thought at first. He took the commuter train to New York like everyone else and occasionally drove. He was an enigma, except for one thing: He drove a funny looking car. We checked with the dealer where he bought the car and found he’d paid cash. No one wanted that car because of its color, so he got it cheap. The dealer asked him for his driver’s license, but he refused to show it. He avoided saying who he was or where he came from. The dealer let that slide. He just wanted to get rid of the car.

“That just added to his ‘average Joe’ persona. What kind of guy would drive an unwanted, copper-colored car? A nice guy, you’d assume, but you’d be wrong. He was a bad guy, hiding in plain sight.

“We didn’t dig any deeper, as we should have, until we saw your mom, Chrissie.” Frank looked directly at Chrissie, who stood next to her mom, and she lowered her head and blushed. “She showed up with her car just as Joe Moretti made an appearance at the UN Mission. It was a red flag. And, Chrissie, when you contacted us to ask about the recordings of Joe Moretti’s comings and goings, we knew you were onto something.

“When you asked me to meet with you and your friends—‘Jason and the Detectives,’ you called them—I came right away. And not a second too soon, it turned out. I didn’t learn much that we didn’t already know or suspect, but that was just when Moretti—his name is actually Losif Moretov—decided to run. You’d flushed him out. You should have called me right away, but when things get really rushed like that, it’s the last thing on your mind, I know.

“I was just leaving the meeting. Jim and Bill were giving me directions on how to get out of here when we saw you leave in a hurry and realized something was up. To be honest, we never would have known he was escaping or where he was off to had you not taken chase.

“The three of us jumped in our cars and followed. You must have been going *really* fast because it was hard to keep up. You hightailed it so fast you must have broken every speed limit in the book, but you did what you had to do.

“We got to the airstrip late, as you know—too late to stop Moretov from taking off. We were really angry, I tell you. But then, miraculously, his plane turned around and came *back*.”

At this point, Frank took a breath and stopped. “I’ll have a cup of that coffee now,” he said. Marjorie gazed at him, somewhat astonished by what she’d heard, but managed to keep a steady hand as she poured.

“I take it black,” he told her in response to her questioning look, and he took a brief moment to take a sip.

Chapter 40:

“I’m sure you’re all wondering: Why did Moretov come back?” Like a public speaker who knows when to pause, Frank scanned the assembled audience. Everyone looked back at him expectantly.

“Who flew that drone?” he asked.

Jason, standing with his father and sister in the rear of the room, hesitantly raised his hand.

“You saved the day. I don’t know what you did, but you disrupted that plane’s avionics. The pilot couldn’t fly out because it had no communications and no transponder.”

The others all looked at Jason, who, as Chrissie had done just before, looked down at the floor. However, he didn’t blush. He shrugged humbly.

“Had that plane kept going, it would have been shot down, either by us or by another country. It would be considered rogue. A threat.

“So you did good, young man. You can’t overestimate the value of the information we got from that plane. Let me tell you what happened.”

Feeling a pang of pride, Jason briefly bowed his head. He’d done what he could, as anyone in his place would have done also, so he did not feel the pride was fully warranted. Nevertheless, he appreciated the recognition and his flushed face revealed his mixed emotions.

“You saw that we arrested Moretov. His value was not the information he has, though I’m sure he has plenty. A guy like that won’t talk. We now know he was an assassin, yet there is no way to prove that. But he still has value to us. We took him into custody and we’ll keep him as an asset whom we can trade for a United States citizen held prisoner in Russia.

“But there’s more. When the airplane returned, we took the pilot and crew into custody too. Unlike Moretov, they have a lot to say. They have been working for the Russian government for years, ferrying their high-level people from place to place. They don’t much care for Putin and his tactics, so they’re willing to give us the names of their passengers and places they went. They’ve agreed to tell us everything they know.

“I can’t tell you how important that is. We will keep them talking until we’re satisfied. We’ll then give them U.S. passports. They can live here in the United States or anywhere else in the world they wish to go, except for Russia. They’d probably be killed if they went there.

“And there’s even more. An absolute treasure trove. The computer and radio equipment that Moretov took with him from his home here was loaded on the plane, where we confiscated it. You can’t imagine the importance of this. We’ll transport that equipment to FBI headquarters in Washington, and they’ll take it apart, piece by piece. First of all, we’ll learn when and how the Russian government communicates with its spies, and second, we’ll download all the information that’s on the hard drive and work on decrypting it.

“And if that’s not enough, we also have the Russian plane. We can, and will, study this aircraft and its avionics technology to see what we can glean from it. Most of it, I’m sure, was stolen from Boeing and Airbus, but at a minimum, we can determine the level of sophistication of our adversary, the Russian government.”

With that, Special Agent Frank Abate gave a small bow and took his leave, saying, “I thank you all. You did good. *Really* good. Unless this episode is to be kept confidential, I believe you can expect an invitation from the White House to meet the President.”

Jason again felt a swell of pride as the room erupted into applause—some for Frank, but mostly for themselves. It was surreal. What had started as a simple drone purchase had turned into something that felt much bigger than him or any of his friends.

Jason glanced around the room at the others—his growing team of detectives. It was crazy to think about how far they'd come, how much they'd uncovered. Who would've thought a bunch of kids, with nothing more than curiosity and a drone, could get this far?

He smiled to himself. *We did this. We actually made a difference.*

THE END