

JASON AND THE DETECTIVES - BOOK 1

The Case of the Missing Jewelry

By Karl Milde

Chapter 1: The Move

“But I’ll miss all my friends!” Jason protested vehemently when his mom and dad told him they would be moving out of the city. “Can’t we stay here? *Please!*” Even as tears welled up in his eyes, he could tell his pleading would be of no use. He’d soon be leaving his home in Brooklyn for upstate New York, and that was that. Where was this crappy place called Somers, anyway?

Jason, age nine, had been attending PS 29 since kindergarten and was now in fourth grade. Nearly every day he and his friends would meet after school in the vest-pocket “Cobble Hill Park” and would play games of their own invention. In one of his favorites, which they called “Whodunnit,” they pretended to be detectives. One of the boys thought of a crime and the others interrogated him. They gave themselves twenty questions to figure out the where, the when, the how, and the who did it.

On the last half-day of school in mid-June, Jason bid a sad farewell to all his friends there and walked home with a heavy heart. A large moving van stood at the curb in front of the brownstone that had been his home his *whole life*. As he arrived, he saw two movers shove the last few cardboard boxes into the back of the truck and pull down the rear door. “That’s finally it,” said one of the men to the other. “These people sure have a lot of stuff.”

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

Jason jogged up the cement steps and entered their family home one last time. All the rooms had been emptied and the sound of his footsteps on the hardwood floors echoed from the bare walls. He took a peek in his bedroom, but without furniture it looked very different from before. It was no longer his room, so there was nothing to say goodbye to. He rejoined his family outside where they were exchanging goodbye hugs with many of their neighbors. Even friendly “Uncle Ted,” who owned a small jewelry store on nearby Court Street, was there to wish them well.

Jason had not seen, nor could he even imagine, what their new home in Somers might look like, but of one thing he was sure: It could not possibly be as nice as their brownstone in Brooklyn. All he knew was that they were going to a place called “Heritage Hills.”

Chapter 2: A New Home

Jason sat glumly in the back seat of the car as they followed the moving van on their drive north to Somers. His mother had made a box lunch for everyone to eat on the way. He ignored the family banter as he munched quietly on his PB&J sandwich, alone with his thoughts.

Jason’s dad turned into the entrance at Heritage Hills followed by their two movers in the moving van. With dad in the family car were Jason’s mom in the front passenger seat, and both Jason and his younger sister, Amy, in the back. Jason paid close attention as they drove through what looked like a park, with lakes, trees and acres of lawn, interspersed with buildings designed and painted to blend into the landscape. Jason saw only the occasional person, quite unlike what he was used to. The streets in Brooklyn were always busy with people bustling hurriedly about. This place was so strangely serene, Jason had the feeling he was moving to a different planet.

They wended their way through a spider web of roads and finally entered a side road to a small cluster of homes. After pulling into an empty parking space, Jason’s dad quickly jumped out of the car and directed the movers to back the van up to one of the units. Jason climbed out with the rest of his family and for a moment stood staring at the surrounding buildings. All were painted the same tan color with olive trim.

His dad pressed some buttons on a keypad near the garage door and it slowly rose, revealing a completely empty space. “Finally, a *garage*,” he remarked cheerfully. “Much better than parking on the street. And they don’t have alternate side parking to make room for street sweepers.” He stepped around to the side of the building and approached the front door. He produced a key from his pocket, inserted it into a keyhole and unlocked the door. He stepped inside and held the door open as the family entered.

Jason and Amy followed their mom into the kitchen and looked around at the gleaming new appliances. “Wow!” Amy exclaimed. “The kitchen’s really neat!”

“Go choose your bedrooms,” mom said. “If you can’t decide between you, come back and we can discuss it.” Jason and Amy made a fast beeline for the bedroom wing. They found a big master bedroom with an enormous bathroom and two smaller bedrooms with a shared bath. Amy preferred the bedroom closest to the bathroom, which was fine with Jason. He chose the bedroom across the hall with the sliding glass door out to the deck.

Chapter 3: A New Friend

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

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

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

Jason was not so sure. He asked to be excused to look around outside while there was still daylight. It being mid-June, darkness was not expected until eight-thirty or nine. "That's fine," mom said. "But stay close to home," she cautioned, "and don't go out on the main road."

As Jason saw, there were six or seven units in the cluster, all similar to the one his parents bought. One of the far units had a big picture window facing his, and a huge garage door. His parents should have gotten a larger garage, he thought, so there would be space for a workbench. As he stood there, he saw someone come out the door of that far unit. It was a boy who seemed to be about his own age, and he came walking over. "Hi, I'm Matt," he said when he came close. "I saw you when you arrived. There's not a lot of us kids around here at Heritage, so I was hoping someone my own age would move in."

Jason gave Matt his name and added, "We just moved here from Brooklyn. Today was my last day of school so I'm free for the summer. I'll be starting fifth grade in the fall."

"Same as me. There's another fifth grader here too. His name's Luke. He lives pretty close, so we get together a lot. You should join us."

Jason couldn't believe his luck. He hadn't even unpacked yet and he'd already met a new friend. "What's there to do here?" he asked.

"Not a whole lot. We don't have a baseball diamond, a basketball court, or anything like that. But there's this cool place where we go that nobody knows about. It's like our hideout."

"We had a special place like that in Brooklyn where we played detective."

"Detective?" Matt replied. "What's that, some kind of game?"

"Yeah, sort of. One of us made up a crime and we asked him questions. Like an interrogation."

"Made up a crime? Like pretend?"

"Yeah."

“Wouldn’t it be better if you solved a real crime?”

“Well, you can’t just walk up to a cop and ask, ‘You got any crimes for us to solve?’”

“But maybe you *can*,” Matt said. “My dad happens to be a police officer.”

Chapter 4: The Thefts at HH

The next day was a Saturday, the beginning of summer for all the school children in Heritage Hills. Although many would attend summer camp for eight or nine weeks, most camps did not begin until a week later. That meant the children had a whole week within which to decompress and, well, just *play*.

Jason walked over to Matt’s unit and pressed the doorbell. Someone came running to the door and he heard it unlock. The door opened and there stood Matt. “Hi, Jason,” he said. “Wait just a second. I’ll tell my parents I’m going out.”

Matt had already agreed to meet with Jason that morning and walk with him over to Luke’s to meet Matt’s long-time friend. While on the way Matt told him Luke’s parents were very wealthy and allowed Luke to do almost anything he wanted. As a result, Matt said, Luke was not only a bit of a brat, he also acted superior to other kids sometimes, adding that now and again he’d had to let Luke know that he was out of line. “I’m just saying. You can form your own opinion, but you’ll see what I mean.”

Luke’s home turned out to be a stand-alone unit, one of the largest in Heritage Hills, with a huge deck overlooking one of the fairways of the eighteen-hole golf course. Luke himself was rather short for his age and so skinny he looked like a beanpole. One good punch would knock him over, Jason thought. Having experienced the school of hard knocks on the streets of Brooklyn, Jason didn’t feel the least bit intimidated.

“Who’s this guy?” Luke asked Matt, seemingly annoyed that Matt had another friend along.

“This is Jason. He moved in yesterday, right near me.”

Luke eyed Jason suspiciously. “Where you from?”

“I came up from Brooklyn, with my parents and my sister.”

“I heard all the good kids go to private school in the city. What’s that like?”

“I didn’t. I went to PS 29. Right near me.”

Luke shot Jason a look of disdain. “*Public school? In the City? I’ve heard the public schools there are terrible.*”

Jason stared at Luke with a face so fierce that Luke averted his eyes. Jason knew he needed to establish his *bona fides* if he were to get along with Matt and Luke, so he countered with, “You and Matt are in public school here in Somers, right?”

“Yes, but...” Luke began. “I’m sorry. Forget what I said.”

Matt quickly spoke up in an attempt to change the subject. “Jason told me about this game he used to play with his friends in Brooklyn. It’s called ‘Whodunnit.’ I thought we could try it here, except maybe we can be real detectives and solve real crimes.”

“Really?” Luke looked at Jason with what appeared to be a new attitude of respect.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “One or two of us would make up a crime. Then the rest of us would interrogate them, like real detectives.”

“I told my dad about it,” Matt said, “and asked him if there were any real crimes we could work on. He didn’t like the idea, but he let something slip. He said there’s been a series of jewelry thefts around here. About one a month for the last five months.”

Jason brightened. “*That’s great,*” he exclaimed excitedly, but then caught himself. “No, not that there were jewelry thefts. It’s that we could work together to catch the thief.”

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

Chapter 5: A Plan of Action

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

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

“I don’t think so,” Matt replied. “In the first place he didn’t like the idea of us playing detective. And I’m not sure he even knows. He did say the police are looking for just one guy. Whoever did it, pulled off all the thefts in pretty much the same way.”

“There must be another way to find the places,” Jason said. “But first let’s get our hands on a map.”

“How about asking a real estate agent? They must have maps,” Luke said.

After a beat Matt suggested, “*Google Maps*. We bring Heritage Hills up on the screen and print it out.”

“Let’s try Luke’s idea first,” Jason replied. “The maps you print from *Google Maps* are too faint for some reason.”

“I’ll get my mom to drive me into Somers,” Luke said. “One of those agencies must have a map.”

Jason suddenly remembered. “This afternoon I’m going with my family to check in at the Security Office. We need to register our cars and get our photo ID’s. While we’re there, I’ll ask them about the thefts. Maybe they even have videos showing the cars coming and going on different places here in Heritage.”

“Those guards are not going to give you anything,” Matt explained. “I know how the police work. They don’t even tell each other stuff, never mind telling a random member of the public.”

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

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

“If the police are looking for a serial thief, there ought to be something about it in the news reports,” Jason said. “I’ll do some Internet research and see what I can find.”

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

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

All three agreed. Having thus embarked upon their first detective endeavor together, they started to walk up the hill, to reach the hideout Matt told Jason about.

Chapter 6: The Hideout

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

“We have at least a half a mile to go,” Luke replied.

“Really? Where the heck is it?”

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

“How should I know?”

“The West Hill is the highest, and our hideout is at the top,” Matt replied.

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

“No, that’s not at the very top.”

“Then where?”

“It’s called Recreation Area 2. Not too many people know about it. I think we’re the only ones who go there now. We’ve never seen anyone else.”

“What’s up there?”

“You’ll see.”

Jason and his new friends Matt and Luke continued on without a further word to trudge up the hill on West Hill Drive. Matt and Luke finally turned onto a cross street, Pond View Drive. A short distance later they arrived at a parking area and climbed some steep steps marked by a sign for “Tennis Court 5.”

From the top of the steps they walked past the tennis court and continued on up the hill over a dirt road barely wide enough for a car. When they reached the very top they saw an open shelter: a simple structure having no more than a roof supported by four posts. Within it stood a rustic picnic table with benches on each side. Outside of the shelter, to one side, was a rusty outdoor grill built into cement base. On the other side was a similar cement base that, without a grill, resembled a lectern. Although these various structures were evidently built for Heritage Hills residents to use for outdoor events, to Jason they appeared unused and abandoned. Having been long forgotten by the residents, this place was a perfect spot for a secret hideout.

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

“We picked this place so no one can find us,” Matt said. “It’s been abandoned for years. The only people who come up this far are some men who work for the water company.” As they walked up, Jason had seen two large water tanks that were higher than the tennis court but below the crest of the hill.

“What do you do up here?” Jason asked.

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

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

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

Chapter 7: When and Where?

On Saturday afternoon, Jason joined his family in a visit to the Heritage Hills security office at the Activities Center. As usual, Jason's dad drove the family car with his mom in the front passenger seat and with Sarah and Jason in the back. Jason's dad found an open parking space near the Center, and they all got out and traipsed up to the building that housed both the fitness center and the security office. At the security office window, Jason's dad explained to the female officer at the front desk that they had moved to Heritage Hills just the day before and wanted to apply for ID badges. From reading the materials he received when they purchased their unit, he had learned that such badges were the keys they needed to access the gym, the swimming pools and certain other Heritage Hills facilities.

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

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

Jason stood near the window meanwhile and scanned what he could of the office. He could see only the back of the computer screen the security officer was using. He thought maybe it displayed images picked up from video cameras in Heritage Hills. He confirmed this by commenting absently, "You watching videocams?"

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

"Really? Do you have them at all the entrances?" Jason tried to gather intel without revealing what he was doing.

"Yes, we do. We have cameras everywhere."

"How long do you keep the videos?"

"Only a week. That's all that's necessary. If there's a problem at any time, and we see something relevant on a video, we archive it."

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

"*The jewelry?* You know about that?" The officer shot Jason a strange look.

"Doesn't everyone know?" Jason remarked offhandedly.

"Not really. No. That's still under investigation," she replied, and then asked pointedly, "How did you find out?"

"I don't know," Jason said. "The news I guess. Is it supposed to be secret?"

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

Their conversation was interrupted by Jason's mother, who had just finished filling out the form. "Here," she said, handing the clipboard back to the officer. "It's all done." The officer scanned the form for completeness, then pointed to the security office door.

"Can you all please come in?" she said, smiling. Jason's family filed into the small office space and stood at attention while the officer took a picture of each person in turn. While standing there, Jason could see the officer's computer screen, displaying a "Hollywood Squares" of small videocam images from various sites at Heritage Hills. Jason assumed that images received from other, additional videocams could be accessed as well by the click of a mouse.

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

Chapter 8: Email to Jason

If could only I could take a look at that file, Jason thought, quickly tearing his eyes away from the folder marked "Confidential – Jewelry Thefts" to avoid giving away his keen interest in its contents. The file lay on a small desk in the back of the security office.

The security officer was busy taking head shot photos of each member of Jason's family. Jason was second in turn after his younger sister Sarah. Just as soon as his photo was taken, Jason stepped aside and made a call with his cellphone. Speaking softly, and with his hand cupped around his mouth, he said "Matt. I want you to call the security office, *right now*. Please hurry." He then pressed the red button to terminate the call.

A moment later the office phone on the front desk rang. The security officer said, "Excuse me," and took the call. As soon as she did so, Jason stepped over to the small desk in back and opened the file folder. Seeing a number of names and addresses on the first page, he quickly snapped a photo with his cellphone. He closed the cover and returned to his place next to his mother.

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

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

As he said this, the security officer ended the call and turned around. She looked first at Jason and then at Jason's parents, clearly noticing that something out of the ordinary just happened. "What?" she asked. "What's going on?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all," Jason's father said. "It's a family matter."

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

"Give me about a half hour to process these and prepare your badges," the officer said. "Perhaps you'd like to look around a bit at the Activities Center and see what we have here. You should definitely walk over to the Activities Office and speak to Andrew. He'll take your names and addresses and tell you how to log into the Society website."

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

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

Jason hesitated. "Let me explain, Dad... This is not what it seems. I needed..." While he was speaking he quickly tapped the photo on the screen, then typed something and pressed the screen again a couple of times.

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

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

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

The same moment he did so, a blank message with a photo attachment appeared in Jason's email inbox.

Chapter 9: The Clue

After a visit with Andrew to have their names and email addresses added to the activities mailing list, and after obtaining their badges from the security office, Jason's family felt their move to Heritage Hills was complete. As soon as they returned home, Jason went straight to his room and closed the door.

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

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

“What? You got...”

“Yeah. The security office had them, and I...um...shot a photocopy of the list when they weren’t looking.”

“Just a minute...” Jason waited while Matt retrieved his email from his cellphone and brought up the image of the list. “That’s awesome. Good going, Jason. Now if Luke was able to get that map of Heritage, we’re golden.”

Jason heard a tone and looked at the screen of his phone. “Gotta go, Matt. It’s Luke calling. I’ll find out if he has the map. Bye.”

Jason ended Matt’s call and took Luke’s. “Hi, Luke, I’m here. I sent you an email with a list of names and addresses. I found out whose jewelry was stolen. Did you get us a map?”

“Yeah, I did. They didn’t want to give it to a kid like me, so I got my mother to ask for it. She can talk anything out of anybody if she wants to. You said you know who got robbed?”

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

“Matt too, right?”

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

Jason printed out three copies of the list and called Matt. The two met outside and trudged up the hill together to the hideout. Luke was already there when they arrived and had the map spread out on the picnic table under the shelter. The three boys found the map location of each condo unit on Jason’s list and circled it in pencil.

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

Matt suggested approaching his dad with this new-found information with a bluff that he knew a lot more. He might get him to open up and tell him what the police knew about the thefts.

Suddenly it came to Jason what had previously eluded him about the locations of the thefts. All the heists were in stand-alone condo units, like the one Luke lived in. Maybe, just maybe, the thief could be enticed to strike again – this time at Luke’s home.

Chapter 10: Catch a Thief

Jason told Matt and Luke about enticing the thief to strike again – this time at Luke’s home. They agreed with the plan, but they had no idea how to go about it.

Luke said he thought he could get his parents to leave home for a brief summer vacation, but none of the three boys could think of a way to let the thief know they were gone. Luke could stay over at Matt’s home, as he often did anyway, so Luke’s home would be empty making it an easy mark for the burglar.

Jason reasoned that the burglar looked for, and watched, those large units on the West Hill that remained dark all night, and made his (or her) entry in the late hours when most people were sound asleep. While homes of some of the absent residents were illuminated in the evening by lights on a timer, many were not, and the latter were the ones a burglar would prefer.

The boys decided finally to give it a go. From Jason’s list they noticed the burglar had stolen jewelry about once a month for seven months, and the last theft had happened nearly a month prior. If the burglar were on some kind of schedule, he (or she) would be due to return fairly soon.

Luke’s first mission, therefore, was to convince his parents to leave. As it turned out they were more than willing to take a brief trip to Vermont, and they left the very next day.

The boys agreed to take turns standing watch to see if the burglar tried to break in. That evening Jason stood watch for seven hours, from eight o’clock until three in the morning when he finally gave up and went home. He had found a place behind nearby shrubbery that gave him a view of both the front of the building and the patio in back. Several cars drove up, but none of them stopped. One of them, he noticed, was a dark-colored SUV, but from where he stood, (or more correctly) lay, he could not read the license plate number. He was able to see the car’s grille, however, and recognized it as a BMW.

Matt stood watch the second night, while Luke remained in Matt’s room at home with the door closed. Matt’s parents never knew Matt was gone, and it would have been awkward if Matt had seen the burglar and alerted the police. As with the previous night, however, very few cars drove past Luke’s home, none of them was a dark SUV.

It was Luke’s turn on the third night and he opted to stay inside his own home but remain awake the entire night. At about two in the morning he heard a sound in the back of the unit. He looked out the dining room window but saw nothing. He went into the kitchen to look out the front window and could vaguely make out the image of a dark SUV. He returned to his bedroom and, just as he entered, he heard a noise outside his bedroom window. Looking in that direction he saw, outlined in the window, the silhouette of a man trying to open it.

Luke quietly dialed 911. “Someone is breaking into our home,” he whispered with his hand cupped to his cellphone. The operator asked for, and Luke gave her, his name and his address. As he said this, the sounds in the back suddenly ceased. Luke waited, and a minute or two later he heard the SUV outside start its engine and drive away.

Chapter 11: The Thief’s Exit

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

As they walked up to the window, Jason saw that the same officer who had prepared their badges last Saturday was on duty. “Hi, remember me?” he smiled. “I came here with my family last Saturday to get our badges.”

“Yes, of course. How may I help you?”

Jason launched into an explanation how he and his two friends had identified what they thought was the jewelry thief’s car. He asked the officer if they could watch the video streams of the many entrances at Heritage Hills to look for that car and perhaps get its license plate number.

“We should look first to see if the car belongs to someone here at Heritage, don’t you think?” the officer suggested. “We keep a running list of the makes, models and plate numbers of all the residents’ cars.” As she spoke she typed a few keys on her computer keyboard to search this database. “I see a number of BMW SUV’s,” she said. “Two of them are black.”

“Can you tell us who they belong to?”

“I’m afraid that’s confidential, but I can tell you that neither car could have been involved in the jewelry thefts. Their owners are long-time residents and...um... quite senior in age.”

“How about the video images then? Can we look at them?” Jason asked. “I’m thinking the burglar most likely came from outside of Heritage.”

“I agree. Let’s take a look.”

The security officer invited the little group into the office to see her computer screen. With Jason, Matt and Luke standing behind her and Jason’s mom at their side, she brought up the archived videos for the last three days, showing all six entrances and exits for Heritage Hills: three on the East Hill and three on the West. She fast forwarded through the hours from nine in the evening until four in the morning each day, but they could see neither a black, nor a dark colored, SUV on the screen.

Jason asked her to scan through the videos once more, but again they saw nothing of interest. Jason and his friends stood dumbfounded, disappointed, and discouraged by the result. They had been certain the dark BMW SUV was the key to exposing the burglar, but they seemed to have reached a dead end.

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

He unfolded the map he'd received from Luke and spread it out on his bed. In the lower right corner, he'd seen something odd that he now focused on closely. It was a connection between Heritage Hills and an external roadway, called "David Road," that bore the legend:

BREAK AWAY
FIRE GATE

Five minutes later Jason was out the door, running toward this spot to investigate.

Chapter 12: Whodunnit?

What Jason saw when he reached the end of the road in Heritage Hills was a wide opening in a stone wall with a chain across it, fastened at one end with a padlock. The chain appeared old but the lock was new. Someone had apparently removed the old lock, perhaps with a bolt cutter, and replaced it with the new one. This enabled him to remove the chain and drive through the opening, and thereafter replace the chain so no one would notice.

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

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

"Whatever for?" his mother asked.

"I'll explain on the way. Pick up Matt and go to Pool 4. I'll meet you there. We'll stop on the way and pick up Luke. Please hurry."

Jason pocketed the phone and started off, running just as fast as he could back toward home. When he reached the stop sign on West Hill Drive he looked around for a video camera, but saw none. There was a lamp post nearby, but that was all. He continued on the short distance further to the Pool 4 parking lot and waited for

his mother to pick him up. Ten minutes later he, Matt and Luke were in the car with Jason's mom, heading for the security office.

The security officer who assisted them earlier was still there. Jason asked her if there were a videocam on West Hill Drive, anywhere near Pool 4. "Yes, as a matter of fact. There were a number of accidents there a few years back, so they put up a stop sign and added a videocam."

The officer brought up the video stream from the nights in question. Jason and his two friends watched the screen carefully as they fast-forwarded through the relevant hours. "Stop there," Luke said abruptly. "Can you run it back?" The officer ran it back, replayed the video at normal speed, and there it was. A dark-colored SUV turned into the side street from West Hill Drive at two thirty in the morning. The officer stopped the video when the rear license plate came into view.

"I'll quickly find the vehicle owner from the DMV database," the officer said, typing on the keyboard and bringing up the DMV website. A moment later, the owner's name and address appeared on the screen: "Theodore Spencer, 257 Baltic Street, Brooklyn, NY."

"That's *Uncle Ted*," Jason exclaimed, staring at the screen. "He owns a jewelry store on Court Street in Brooklyn."

Jason's mom looked as if she were about to faint. "Oh, my God," she gasped, clasping her hand on her mouth.

"Do you know him?" the officer asked.

"Yes, we do," she said faintly. "He's a friend of ours."

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

As 'Uncle Ted' later explained to Jason's family in an apologetic voice, "I needed more inventory for the store, but I couldn't afford it. When I heard you were looking to buy a condo upstate, I followed you there. The very first time I saw Heritage Hills, I knew it would be a gold mine. I went for the largest condo units because I figured they had the nicest jewelry. I waited until dark and chose units that didn't have the lights on."

Chapter 13: Summer Plans

Ted Silver's arrest was announced to Heritage Hills residents by a blast email from the president of the Heritage Hills Society. The story was picked up by the local newspapers, the *Somers Record* and the *Journal News* and Ted quickly became known as the "HH Burglar."

To add human interest, the report in the Heritage Hills Newsletter focused on the role of Jason, Matt and Luke in identifying the thief. As a consequence, this group of three young boys became known as the “HH Detectives.”

Three days later, after the excitement had died down, the boys arranged to meet at their hideout at the top of the West Hill. Jason and Matt met first and walked together up the hill toward the kid-friendly Pool 3 and Tennis Court 5. When they crested the top of the hill, they saw Luke ensconced in the shelter, calmly sitting on the picnic table.

“What took you guys so long?” cracked Luke with a big grin on his face.

“I don’t know,” Matt replied. “Maybe your dad gave you a lift in your big Mercedes?”

“You have a problem with that?”

“Nope. Just sayin’. My mom drives an old Dodge.”

“What can I do,” Luke exclaimed, holding his arms wide, palms out, in a helpless gesture. Then added with a wink, “Just the luck of the Irish, I guess.”

“Guys,” Jason broke in, “we solved our first crime!” he said excitedly. “You know what that *means*?”

Matt and Luke both stared at him. “No, what?” they asked both at once.

“Everyone now thinks we’re honest-to-goodness detectives. Matt, maybe your dad will let us know when there’s another crime that needs solving.”

“I don’t think so. He wasn’t too happy about what we did. He said it was very dangerous, we acting as cops.”

“That may be true, but...”

“Anyway, Matt and I are heading for summer camp on Saturday. I’m sorry,” Luke said.

“Yeah. I went there last year and liked it a lot. I talked Luke into going with me this year.”

When Jason heard this, his mouth dropped. “You’re leaving...?” he repeated, trying to understand the import of what Matt was saying.

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

Jason felt almost like crying when he heard this. His only friends at Heritage Hills would be leaving for practically the whole summer. He didn’t know what to say.

“Maybe you could join us,” Luke volunteered, when he saw Jason’s reaction. “It would be fun...”

Jason’s face brightened a bit. “You think so? Oh, but I have a younger sister. Her name’s Amy. She doesn’t have any friends here yet, and she’d be all alone if I left.”

“That’s no problem,” Matt said. “There’s a girl’s camp right close by. It’s on the other side of the lake. How old is Amy?”

“She’s eight.”

“*Bingo*. You have to be at least eight. She could go to camp too. We even have socials with the girls from that camp.”

“I don’t know... It’s kind of late to apply don’t you think?”

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

THE END

JASON AND THE DETECTIVES – BOOK 2

The Case of the Haunted Summer Camp

By Karl Milde

Chapter 1: On the Road to Adventure

Three days later Jason, Matt and Luke left together for Camp Wigwam, which was smack in the middle of Maine.

“I sure hope we get the same cabin,” Matt said as the big, chartered bus came into sight. The boys were waiting with their parents, along with a half dozen other families, at the first Interstate 95 rest area in Connecticut when the bus pulled in, right on schedule, on its trip from New York City. The bus was already half full. It had only a couple of more stops to make – one in Rhode Island and one in Massachusetts – before heading northward to deliver the thirty-five eager young boys to their summer home away from home.

Jason, Matt and Luke received hugs and kisses from their parents and then got in line to board the bus. When all the boys had finally boarded, stowed their gear and found seats, the driver closed the big heavy door and gave two sharp toots on the horn. The boys pressed their hands and faces to the windows to catch a last glimpse of their parents as the bus roared off. None of them noticed the tears welling up in their parents’ eyes as they waved excitedly nor did they see two of the mothers break down and cry. Amy, Jason’s younger sister, and Karen, Matt’s younger sister, stood next to their parents and waved furiously. The girls were leaving for their sleep away camp the very next day.

As the bus moved out, Jason, Matt and Luke sat back and relaxed after the hectic morning of getting ready. Jason closed his eyes and tried to imagine himself at Camp Wigwam. Of the three, only Matt had seen this camp. He had attended the summer before because his parents had taken a round-the-world cruise.

“How big is the lake?” Jason broke the silence.

“Indian Pond? It’s pretty big. ‘Bout a mile across. But it has a little island in the middle.”

“Oh yeah? Can you swim out to it?”

“You’ve got to be a real good swimmer.”

“Do they have boats?”

“Yeah. Canoes mostly. And sailboats. It’s great for learning to sail.”

“I’ve never been in a canoe, or a sailboat for that matter,” admitted Jason.

“No problem. They give you lessons on everything.”

“Are there any other camps on the lake?” asked Luke.

“There’s one. It’s the girls’ camp where Karen and Amy are going tomorrow. Camp Wenonah. We have a few dances with the girls from that camp on Friday nights. Otherwise we don’t have much to do with them.”

“We can change that,” remarked Luke, prophetically.

As the bus sped on, the boys talked, played “UNO” with a deck of cards and sang camping songs, led by a camp counselor named “Tonto” who had joined them at the bus stop in Providence, Rhode Island. After another stop along Route 128 near Boston, the bus continued on the final leg of its journey. When the bus crossed the Portsmouth bridge over the Piscataqua River, the boys pressed their noses to the windows.

“We’re on the Portsmouth Bridge boys. When we get halfway across this bridge, we’ll be in Maine!” announced the bus driver over the loudspeaker system.

“Hooray!” A large cheer rang out and several boys clapped as the bus crossed the midway point of the bridge. The bus soon passed signs for Kittery, the town where company outlet stores were invented, and then stopped at the entrance to the Maine Turnpike to pick up a ticket.

“From here, boys, it’s about a two-hour drive to Camp Wigwam,” announced the driver.

“Hooray!” came the screams again and then the bus fell strangely silent as each boy thought about his own personal adventure that lay just ahead.

At long last the bus rolled off an exit ramp from the Maine Turnpike and stopped to pay the toll. After another half hour on a two-lane highway, the bus finally slowed and turned onto a narrow dirt road. It passed beneath a wooden archway with the words “Camp Wigwam” across the top and followed the dirt road downhill with dense forest on either side.

“We’re there! We’re here!” exclaimed Matt with excitement.

“It’s about time,” replied Luke, who was more than weary from the journey.

The bus emerged from the forest and came to a stop. Just ahead lay the camp: unpainted log buildings arranged about an expanse of green lawn. In the center of the area an American flag flew atop a tall flagpole. In the distance a blue lake – Indian Pond – sparkled in the sun. Beyond the lake, rising upward and extending almost to the clouds, was a giant mountain dressed in green. The boys had just landed in summer heaven.

Jason and the Detectives - Book 2 is available from Amazon, or write to Karl at karlmilde@aol.com