

JASON AND THE DETECTIVES

The Case of the Missing Money

By Karl Milde

Chapter 1: The Subject is Money

Half a year after the move, Jason finally felt at home in the Heritage Hills community. His room was a familiar safe space now, with everything in its place, and Amy seemed just as settled.

At six thirty that evening, Jason and his family sat down to dinner. Everyone had loaded their plates with hearty beef stew and mashed potatoes, and after they had given thanks to the Almighty for the many blessings they'd received, Mr. Brooks made a surprise announcement. "I expect to be promoted tomorrow," he said. "It comes with a pretty big raise.

At six thirty that evening, after everyone was seated and had loaded their plates with a hearty beef stew and mashed potatoes, and after they had given thanks to the Almighty for the many blessings they'd received, Mr. Brooks made a surprise announcement. "I expect to be promoted tomorrow," he said. "It comes with a pretty big raise."

Everyone's eyes lit up and looked in his direction.

"Oh, dear!" Mrs. Brooks responded effusively. "You've been working so hard. It's well deserved." She raised her water glass. "Let's all give a toast!"

Jason and Amy followed suit and took a celebratory sip from their water glasses.

"Good going, Dad," Jason said, truly proud of his father's many accomplishments. He'd watched his father move ahead in his career, step by step, with occasionally a step back.

Amy made a funny noise and chimed in, “A raise? How much more are you going to get?”

Glad that his younger sister had asked that question so he didn’t have to, Jason looked at his father expectantly. It would be nice to know how much he made.

However, his father’s answer was disappointing. “Don’t worry, Amy,” he told her. “It will be quite enough for our family to live comfortably.”

His curiosity piqued, Jason wondered aloud, “How come we never talk about money in this family? How much does a person need to make to ‘live comfortably’?”

“I don’t know. I already make enough money to have a nice home, drive a pretty good car, go to restaurants now and then, and take a vacation once a year. A lot of people don’t have that.”

“I think I get it,” Jason replied, at the same time thinking there must be a minimum a person needed to earn just to keep a roof overhead. “Since we’re on the subject,” he said, “what’s the *minimum* amount a person needs to make?”

“A minimum for...what exactly?”

“You know,” Jason replied, motioning toward the ceiling with his hands, “for a place to live, for food, for medicine, transportation, that sort of thing.” He hadn’t really thought about it before, but now he was curious what his father would say.

Mr. Brooks sat back in his chair and thought for a moment. “Well,” he began, “the minimum wage has just been raised to seventeen dollars an hour. I imagine that’s the number. I assume our lawmakers have looked into this carefully and have done the math.”

“Seventeen dollars? That’s all?” Jason stared at his father in genuine disbelief. “That’s not even enough to buy a toy. Amy gets more than that for an hour of babysitting.”

“Well, if a person works eight hours, that’s a hundred and thirty-six dollars a day. Seems like a lot of money to me. In a five-day week, let’s see…” Mr. Brooks did a mental calculation.

“That’s almost seven hundred dollars a week. It should be plenty.”

“How much do you make in a week?”

“I can’t tell you. You and Amy shouldn’t have to worry about that.”

Jason pressed further. “Do you make enough to save for the future? Like college for me and Amy?”

“Yes, of course.”

“For retirement?”

“Sure.”

“Do you have savings in addition?”

“I do, but…”

Jason wanted to continue, but his mother cut him off. “That’s quite enough, Jason. I think your father is getting exasperated talking to you about this.”

“Okay, okay.” Jason shook his head, his cheeks warming a little from embarrassment.

“Don’t answer that. But I’m going to look into this stuff on my own. I’ll definitely need to know it when I grow up.”

“Suit yourself,” Mrs. Brooks snapped and stared at him sternly. She then looked around and addressed the others at the table. “Now that we’ve explored that subject to death, Amy, why don’t you tell us what happened at school today?”

Jason didn’t say another word during dinner. He didn’t want to be rude, but he didn’t listen as Amy talked about her day. The conversation about money, followed by his mother’s admonition, had stopped his mental wheels from turning.

Chapter 2: Jason Speaks to His Friends

After dinner, Jason called his friends Matt and Luke and asked them to meet him at their secret hideout, which was at the very top of the highest hill in Heritage Hills. Heritage Hills, a large country community in Somers, New York, was divided by a deep valley into what were called the “East Hill” and “West Hill.” The East Hill was a single high hill, but the West Hill sported at least two or maybe three hills, depending on where you were when you looked at them.

Along the main road, a restaurant sat at what appeared to be the highest point on the West Hill, but the true summit lay beyond. To reach that spot, one needed to drive another quarter mile or so to “Recreation Area No. 2,” a place with two swimming pools and a tennis court located on an elevation behind them. From there, a steep path wound past the elevated tennis court and continued climbing to “Round Top” on the map. There, at this highest point, was a pavilion, two picnic tables, and a rusty outdoor grill, all of which were surrounded by dense woods.

It was a difficult place to find and to get to. Two huge water tanks and a cell tower dominated the high ground between the tennis court and Round Top, making the place even less accessible.

Luke had discovered the spot when he and his family moved to Heritage Hills and knew immediately it would make the perfect hideout. He told Matt about it when his family moved in two months later, and Matt, in turn, told Jason the day he and his family moved to the community. Ever since then, the three would meet at this special place whenever they had “private stuff” to talk about.

Jason climbed the hill to the hideout on Saturday and waited for his two friends. He knew they'd eventually show—he just needed to be patient. As he sat there in the pavilion, he went over in his mind what he would say. He was not at all sure his two BFFs would be as interested and eager as he was to explore the subject of money. They probably never even wondered where it came from. Their parents earned more than enough for their families to live on. Although there were certainly families with children who were in trouble financially, he doubted his friends had met any of them.

Jason tried to imagine what it must be like to have barely enough money to pay for the necessities of life: a roof over one's head, food, and clothing. He recalled that, as a young boy, he once tried to stand in the ocean near the beach, buffeted by the waves. Unable to catch a safe foothold, he lost his balance and fell. Unless his father had quickly reached out and grabbed his hand, he would've been helpless and could have easily drowned.

The memory itself was so unsettling that he now wanted to avoid talking about money altogether, because people without enough money feel similarly helpless, like they're drowning in circumstances beyond their control.

His friends probably wouldn't care anyway or listen. Luke came from a well-to-do family and Matt's father was a state policeman. No way could they could imagine what it was like to be poor.

Hearing his friends' faint voices above the rustling of the leaves, Jason looked down the hill and saw Matt and Luke heading his way. They were trudging slowly upward, engaged in conversation. When one of them looked up, Jason waved excitedly, and they both walked quickly the rest of the way toward him. "Here we are," Luke said finally. "Whassup?"

"Do we have a new case?" Matt asked, panting slightly from the exertion.

“No, but I’ve thought of something we can work on.” Jason looked each of his friends in the eye.

“Yeah?” Luke responded. “What?”

“*Money*. What are all the ways someone can get it?”

“Well, that’s easy. You get a good job. End of story,” Matt replied convincingly. “My dad gets a good salary plus benefits, like healthcare and a pension. What’s there to talk about, except that it’s not enough sometimes? I wish we could go to Disney World, but Dad says it’s too expensive.”

“Your dad’s pay comes from *taxes*,” Luke said accusingly. “Taxes my dad has to pay with the money he makes.”

“Okay, smartass. Where does *his* money come from? What is he, a magician or something?” Matt demanded.

Jason was glad Matt asked that question. He’d wondered the same thing ever since he first got to know Luke, the troublemaker at school. After he’d saved Luke from getting hurt in the bicycle race two years ago, he’d learned Luke’s family was wealthy. Maybe because of this, or maybe not, Luke had developed a disturbing trait he didn’t like: He tended to look down on other people.

“How am I supposed to know?” Luke replied with a snarky tone. “Does your father tell you about chasing speeders?” Luke emphasized *chasing speeders* as if there were something disreputable about policing the highways.

“As a matter of fact, he does. You’d be surprised at what goes on out there. It’s his job to stop those guys and get ’em off the streets.”

“So, what does *your* dad do?” Luke turned on Jason accusingly. “Is he a *plumber* or something?” Apparently, another disreputable profession in his eyes.

“He’s worked for this big company a really long time. From before I was born.”

“Oh yeah? What does he do there?” Luke raised his eyebrows.

“I don’t know much,” Jason replied. “But he told me he started as an engineer out of college. He developed new products, then moved to marketing because he knew those products better than anyone. As long as I can remember, though, he’s been working in finance. He really likes that.”

“Fair enough. And the pay’s pretty good there, right?”

Luke seemed a bit judgmental. Jason thought a moment. “I’m not sure,” he said and eyed Luke. “You never answered Matt’s question,” he pointed out. “You must know what your dad does.”

“Yeah, as it so happens, I do,” he replied, a slight air of superiority creeping into his voice. “He manages a hedge fund on Wall Street. And he does...um, pretty well.” Luke held his chin up, emphasizing that his father made a lot of money.

“*Hedge fund*? What the heck is that?” Matt wanted to know.

Jason knew what it was, having learned about it at the family dinner table some time ago. He was about to explain the concept when he was interrupted.

“It’s a... Oh, forget it. You wouldn’t understand anyway,” Luke said dismissively, waiving both hands in the air.

Matt turned to Jason for support. “Can you believe this? Luke won’t tell us. He probably doesn’t know himself.”

“It’s a way of sucking money out of the stock market,” Jason said, offering Matt some solace. “It’s like stealing, but it’s legal.”

“Oh,” Matt said, deflated by the fact that Jason knew and he didn’t.

Luke stared at Jason, his eyes focusing like laser beams. “That’s not true! It’s not anything like that,” he said angrily.

Jason threw up his hands. “Sorry, Luke. I think it is.”

Seeing Luke’s anger made Jason realize that money was more than just numbers on a screen or a paystub. Money was a form of power. People made strategic choices to try to get more of it. They moved their families to try to access better-paying jobs. One’s life depended, to some extent, on how much money they made. If a person earned a lot, they could buy things and pay for the services they wanted. If they didn’t, well...their life could suck.

Short of finding a better-paying job (not an easy thing to do for some), there was not much a person could do about it. No wonder money was such a sensitive issue, he thought. So hot, in fact, that you weren’t supposed to talk about it.

Chapter 3: Dad's Shocking News

"How'd your day go, dear?" Mrs. Brooks asked her husband, the same question she asked every evening. The whole family had assembled for dinner, and Mr. Brooks had invoked the evening prayer. "Did you get the position you wanted?" she asked brightly.

"No, I didn't," Mr. Brooks said. He looked so dejected that he could hardly speak. His voice was deep and gravelly. "I didn't get the promotion and I *quit*. I handed in my resignation."

Jason and Amy looked up and stared at him in disbelief.

"Oh, *my God*, dear! What in heaven's name happened?" Mrs. Brooks asked, clearly shocked by the news.

"Another guy, Phil Ciaobano, was named vice president." Mr. Brooks looked almost like he wanted to cry as he said this, then added, "Bill Ackerman, the president, brought him on board only a week ago. I didn't even notice he was there."

Jason wasn't accustomed to seeing his father express emotion, but he watched now as his father's true feelings were slipping past all his attempts to hide them. He tried to continue speaking, but for a moment he was unable to do so as his eyes welled with tears.

"I emailed my colleague, Joe Ryley." He paused again and stuttered, attempting to explain his reasons for resigning. "But he knew why I quit. He said he wanted to quit too, out of protest, but he needed his job."

"I'm so sorry," Mrs. Brooks said in a tender voice, filling in the otherwise dead silence at the table. "We can manage as we always have. We'll keep our belts tight. You have nothing to be ashamed of. And nothing to worry about."

Mr. Brooks returned her gaze and saw her face full of sympathy.

Jason, realizing how difficult this disappointment was for his father, sat without speaking, as did Amy. What could they do or say after he'd told them so assuredly, just the day before, that he would be promoted with a substantial pay raise that went with it: a raise that would mean their family could "live comfortably"?

Mr. Brooks looked over at his wife and two children again and took a deep breath. "Thank you all for your understanding," he said quietly. "I'll get through this...uh, setback. I'll be fine as long as I have my family. That's what really matters."

But despite these words, Jason thought his father still looked embarrassed, as though he wished he could disappear.

Mrs. Brooks gazed admiringly at him. "We have each other and two wonderful children," she said quietly.

Jason and Amy glanced briefly at each other.

"Does that mean I won't get that American Girl doll I wanted for Christmas?" Amy asked. Her mother looked at her in horror, and Amy quickly added, "Just *joking*, Mom."

"What did *you* do today, Jason?" Mrs. Brooks asked, turning to him. The question was clearly more to change the subject than to actually probe into whatever project he was working on that day. She wanted him to say something that would lift his father's spirits, but as was quite evident, nothing came immediately to mind.

"I met Matt and Luke at the hideout today," he said, in as cheerful a voice as he could muster. "We just...uh, hung out together."

"What did you and your friends talk about?" his mother asked with a forced smile.

"Nothing much. Just anything that came up."

“Like what?” Mrs. Brooks pressed him.

Jason couldn’t lie. He’d been taught to tell the truth, even though fessing up to something he’d rather keep secret might mean embarrassment, admitting to badmouthing someone, or even hurting someone’s feelings. He didn’t want to darken the mood even further right now, but telling the truth didn’t mean he had to blurt out everything. “We talked about money,” he answered vaguely.

“Oh? Now *that’s* a big subject,” Mr. Brooks said. Jason’s diversion had worked. His father perked up now and seemed interested in the conversation. “What did you and your friends have to say about money?”

“Well, um...we talked about what our dads did for a living. Matt’s dad is a state policeman. You know that, right? And Luke says his dad manages a hedge fund.”

“A hedge fund? That explains why he’s so well off. You know what a hedge fund manager does?”

“Yeah, sort of,” Jason replied. “He sucks money out of the stock market.”

“That’s about right. He invests other people’s money for a maximum return with minimum risk. His clients are rich people. He won’t even take their money to invest unless they’re pretty well off and can stand to lose it if the market sinks. And fund managers charge an arm and a leg for their services.”

It felt good, Jason thought, to have this conversation with his father. “You know so much about it, Dad, maybe *you* should get a job as a money manager.”

“Right now, I’m going to just sit tight and think about what I want to do next,” Mr. Brooks said with some assurance. It was apparent he felt much better than when he’d brought the bad news home to his family.

“You think maybe Luke’s dad could help?” Jason cocked his head questioningly as he looked at him.

Mr. Brooks looked lovingly at Jason. “I doubt it. The work hedge fund managers do is pretty specialized. It’s tailored to their clients. They make a lot of money for them.”

“Would you mind if I talk to Luke about it?” Jason asked finally.

“Okay, but just be careful,” Mr. Brooks warned, suddenly appearing concerned. “I don’t think Luke’s dad will take kindly to your asking around about what he does. I know from experience, whenever you say something that could affect someone’s livelihood, they can get really angry.” He shot Jason a stern but friendly stare. “They often bite back.”

“I’ll be careful.” Jason returned his father’s gaze. He saw that the tears in his eyes had now dried. “But I’m so sorry that new guy got your job. It sure sounds fishy. Doesn’t it?”

“I’m not sure. But there’s nothing I can do about it right now.”

“What did you say the guy’s name was?”

“Phil Ciaobano. Don’t ask me to spell it. I was so angry when they told me, I walked out and quit in a huff. I was pissed. *Really* pissed.”

Amy raised her water glass and chanted, “Good going, Dad! Go, Dad, go!”

Mrs. Brooks and Jason took up the cheer, lifting their glasses high and joining in the chant, all in support of the man of the house. The man who had just quit his job in a huff with no Plan B.

Chapter 4: The Detectives Rally 'Round

Jason awoke with a start. He lay for a moment, remembering where he was and wondering what time it was. Light was streaming in through the window, and he suddenly realized he was running late. He had to get ready for school. *School*, the most important thing in his life right now.

Jason jumped out of bed and greeted the Monday morning with a smile. He rushed through his morning routine—taking a shower, getting dressed, and wolfing down breakfast—before catching the school bus. He sat next to Luke on the bus but kept his thoughts to himself about the stock market. It was far more important that he and Luke stay friends than to prove a point that might offend him. He didn't even convey his thoughts on the subject to Matt, his closest friend, although Matt had been present in his dream. Difficult as it was, in view of what he thought Luke's dad might be doing—gambling with the stock market—Jason stayed focused on his schoolwork and was determined to keep it that way during the entire week ahead.

Jason considered school to be his first priority, and he felt a strong urge do his level best. He was bright, but he still had to work hard to keep up. Good grades did not come easily to him, so he went that extra mile to master the material. He felt like a duck trying to swim against a strong current. To onlookers, he might seem calm, but beneath the water, he was paddling as fast as he could to move himself forward.

When Friday finally came and the upcoming weekend was upon him, Jason felt elated as he rode home on the school bus. He could allow his thoughts to return to what he had put on hold. He could turn to the second most important thing in his life right now: *Helping his dad find a job.*

Jason wondered what would happen if his dad couldn't find work soon. The fear of this prospect loomed larger every passing day, and Jason felt desperately determined to fix this problem.

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Jason, Matt, and Luke met at their hideout on Saturday morning. Jason was eager to tell his friends about his father and how his failure to be promoted had made him so angry that he quit his job.

Earlier that day, he had typed the name "Phil Shibano" into the search engine on his laptop but got nothing. No hits or even hints could be found online. Jason felt certain his father had been given a raw deal by the company he had worked for some twenty-odd years. He wanted to learn the reason for what happened, but he couldn't find even a single thread he could follow. He hoped his friends might have some ideas that could help.

"What's new, guys?" As usual, Luke was first to start the conversation.

"Remember last week? We talked about what our dads did for a living? Well, my dad just quit his job," Jason replied calmly. This was a big deal to his family, but Jason didn't want to overdramatize it. His friends might not think it was so important.

"*Quit his job?*" Matt responded, clearly astounded. "Why? What's going on?"

"Yeah, Jason." Luke's voice showed genuine concern. "What the heck happened?"

"Dad knows what happened, but he has no idea why. Another guy, Phil Ciaobano, got the job dad thought he was going to get. Somebody high up at the company convinced the board of directors to hand this new guy the position. They'd brought him on board only a month ago, and now they made him VP and CFO instead of Dad. It doesn't make any sense."

“Jeez, Jason. That’s awful. I’m so sorry,” Matt said. “Maybe Luke and I can help figure out what went wrong. I mean, *Christ on a bike!* You said your dad’s been working at this same company since he left college? Damn! He ought to be running the company by now.”

“Yeah, let’s all get to work on this,” Luke added. “My dad knows a lot of people in finance. I’ll ask him if he’s heard of this guy Ciaobano.”

Jason couldn’t believe what he was hearing. His friends were circling the wagons to help him—him and his family. “Thank you, guys” was all he could think to say. “I do need help on this. My dad needs your help. In fact, my whole family needs your help. My dad’s out of a job now, and we have no money coming in. It was always other people who were down on their luck. Now it’s us. Now I’m really worried about my dad all of a sudden.”

“Naturally you’re worried,” Matt said. “Luke and I will do our best to help. We’ll get to the bottom of this thing. That’s a promise. For starters, I’ll ask my dad to check out Phil Ciaobano. There must be something there—even if it’s a traffic ticket. Who is this guy? How come *he* got the VP slot instead of your dad? That doesn’t sound right.”

“Yeah. We’re here to help,” Luke added supportively. “Let us do the heavy lifting. You just stay calm, as best you can, and we’ll keep you up to date on whatever we find.”

Jason felt a huge weight being lifted from his shoulders. He hadn’t paid much attention, but he now realized his stress level had increased tremendously since his dad had broken the news about his job. Was his family going to join the ranks of the poor—the very people whose lives he’d tried to imagine only a short week ago?

When the boys left the mountain a short time later, Jason let his friends go on ahead. He rode his bicycle slowly down the hill toward home, deep in thought.

When he got home, he went straight to his room and closed the door. He needed time to think what it would really be like not to have enough money. Searching online, he came upon the work of psychologist Abraham Maslow, who proposed a theory called “hierarchy of needs.” People had to fulfill their basic needs, Maslow said, before they could even think about “higher needs,” which Jason took to mean luxuries. He sat at his desk, deep in thought, wondering what needs were absolutely necessary to survive. These were the things a person couldn’t live without, and they became monthly expenses.

Jason opened his laptop again and started typing. He listed all the items he could think of and wrote down what they cost. After he tallied that up, he figured the monthly income of a person who earned seventeen dollars an hour. He stared at the numbers, surprised and perplexed at what he had found.

Jason closed his laptop computer, closed his eyes, and sat in silence to mull things over. He didn’t leave his room until his mother called him to dinner.

Chapter 5: Jason Gets a Case

At the dinner table, Jason ignored the small talk. He remained silent and waited until for his mother to get down to business. He saw that his father, the breadwinner of their family, fold his napkin over and over again. He was out of a job and clearly stressed. He had no money coming in, and Jason was growing more concerned. Amy also looked a bit worried too as she sat there quietly.

“How is your job search going, dear?” his mother asked his father, although she would’ve known full well that his dad hadn’t had any luck in his attempts to find work this past week. Not a single company had expressed interest in hiring a middle-aged financial executive, either as an employee or an outside consultant.

“I submitted resumes to about ten companies and followed up on all of them with phone calls,” he told his family. “It’s a bit discouraging, let me tell you, but I’ll keep trying. I’m beginning to think I might be in the wrong career.”

“I’m so sorry,” Mrs. Brooks said. “But I’m sure something will turn up. Have you called your friends? You know what they say: Most people find work by networking—letting people know you’re looking.”

“I sent out about a hundred emails to everyone—relatives, friends, business associates. I checked off every single business card I’d collected over the past couple of years. About half of our relatives and friends responded and wished me luck, but no one had any leads I could follow. It’s like a dry hole.”

“Maybe the president of your company — what’s his name? — has it out for you for some reason,” Jason said. “Maybe he’s badmouthing you...”

“His name’s Bill Ackerman. We’ve had our differences I have to admit. Sometimes we’ve disagreed on where the company should be spending its money, but when push came to shove, I’ve always let him have the last say. He’s the CEO, after all. It’s his company. If I’d stuck to my guns, he’d be entirely within his rights to fire me on the spot.”

“So, you groveled.” Jason winked and, just to be sure, added, “I’m kidding.”

“I don’t grovel, and neither should you. Maybe that’s my problem, though. I trust my own judgment.”

“We’re proud of you, dear,” Jason’s mother said warmly. “Don’t worry. We’ll get through this.”

“What did you mean by ‘grovel’?” Amy asked innocently. “Doesn’t it mean you get down on your hands and knees?”

Mrs. Brooks rolled her eyes, and Amy quickly added, “Something will turn up, Dad. It has to, or we’re *doomed*.” Amy clapped her hands and made a *poof* sound, like an explosion.

“Amy!” Her mother shot her a disapproving glare.

“I hope I can find something,” Mr. Brooks said, dejected. “I’m practically at my wits’ end right now.”

“I talked to my friends, Matt and Luke,” Jason told him, ignoring his sister’s antics. “They want to help. Matt’s asking his dad to check on the name Phil Shibano. I googled the name but couldn’t find anything. The police have their ways, though. They’ll find him and check him out.”

“Could be you have the wrong spelling.”

“I tried every spelling I could think of. Shibano. Shabono, Shibana. But I got nothing.”

“I’ll call a friend at the company. Joe Valetti. He can tell me how it’s spelled.”

“Let me know and I’ll tell Matt. Also, Luke’s going to ask his dad if he’s heard of this guy Shibano. Are you okay with that?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure. I have to think over what I want to do.”

“Isn’t finance your field, Dad?” Jason suddenly realized he didn’t really know what his dad did day-to-day when he went to work. “You know a lot about investing in stocks and stuff?”

“IBX—used to be called International Business Exchange—buys distressed companies. My job was to check their assets, their finances, their policies—everything, really—to see what they’re worth and to make sure they’re not doing anything illegal.”

“That’s neat, Dad.” Jason was impressed. “It’s kind of like looking under the hood to see how the company’s running.”

“Good analogy. I’ve had a few years of experience and have gotten pretty good at it. Until now.”

Jason still couldn’t understand how Phil had swooped in and become VP and CFO. “You think he’s on the up and up?” He looked at his father questioningly.

“It just made no sense to me. That’s why I quit.”

“My friends and I could try to get to the bottom of this, Dad.” After thinking a moment, Jason looked at him. “What company were you looking at when you quit?”

“I’d just finished looking at a company, but Ackerman decided not to proceed with it. He told me to look at another. A company called ChemT. They’re like a mini-Dupont. They make chemical weapons for the military.”

“Was there anything special about them?”

“Special? Well, yes. As a matter of fact, I was told they’d just developed a new chemical weapon. It’s top secret. Really hush-hush.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s it for?”

“I don’t know. Ackerman said he didn’t know.”

“Couldn’t you ask the president of ChemT?”

“The first thing I usually do is talk to the president. That way I learn firsthand what a company does and what its plans are for the future. But Ackerman told me to hold off calling him.”

“That’s kind of weird, don’t you think?”

“Yes, I do. The company needs money, and Ackerman is looking to buy it. Cheap.”

“I can see we have a job to do.” Jason’s face was dead serious.

“I doubt if you’ll find out anything, but good luck. They’re very secretive.”

“We’re on it.” Jason rose from the table. “May I be excused?” he asked his mother politely. The gears in his mind were already starting to turn. Mrs. Brooks nodded in assent, and he headed for his room. As he did so he passed by Ami who appeared to be fuming. He assumed it was because she hadn’t been asked to join in working on the new case.

Chapter 6: ChemT

The next morning, Jason, Matt and Luke were hard at work at their hilltop hideout, developing a strategy for investigating IBX. The big question was how to reach inside President Ackerman's office to find out what he and the new VP "Phil Whatever-his-name-was" were up to. Short of placing a secret video camera in the president's office, which was clearly impossible, neither Matt nor Luke had any idea what to do.

"*Damn*. If we only knew somebody inside the company," Matt groaned, clearly frustrated by what they were facing. "Luke, do you think your father might know someone there?"

"I told him about IBX," Luke replied. "No, he doesn't know anyone, but he offered to send one of his employees in there to talk to them. It's a public company. He sometimes sends people to a company to ask around before he makes a major investment from one of his funds."

"Like 'due diligence'—checking to see if a company's cooking the books?" Jason asked and Luke nodded. "Yes, then please ask your dad to send someone in. It just might help."

"Wait," Matt interrupted. "Even if the guy goes in there, he'll never find out what's really going on. They won't admit to any wrongdoing. Police interrogation 101."

"You're right. But I have an idea. If it works, we'll have eyes in the president's office."

"We can spy on the president? Really?" Luke was clearly astounded. "How?"

"Here's my thought. See what you think."

Jason took the next five minutes to tell Matt and Luke what he had in mind. As he set forth the details of his plan, their eyes brightened with interest, and they began to smile.

"Jeez, Jason. That just might work!" Matt said when Jason finished explaining.

* * * *

Klaus Dietrich had a problem. He was president of the company he had founded five years ago, and the company was struggling—floundering, really. It was running out of money.

He'd earned his PhD in chemistry from MIT, and for his doctoral thesis he'd developed compounds of the element tungsten. Also known as “wolfram” and designated by the symbol “W,” tungsten is an extremely hard and brittle metal with a high melting point. The element was unknown to Thomas Edison when he developed a filament for his electric light bulb in 1889. With a carbon-impregnated thread as a filament, his bulbs never lasted more than a few days before they burned out. Tungsten is used in light bulb filaments today; they can remain bright for a year or more.

While at MIT, Dr. Dietrich had experimented extensively, developing new compounds of tungsten. They had such a high melting temperature that a tungsten cup could hold molten steel and such great hardness that a tungsten tool could cut diamonds. His doctoral thesis on these compounds was published in a scientific journal and came to the attention of scientists at the U.S. Army's Aberdeen Proving Ground. After receiving his PhD, Dietrich eventually became the “go-to” expert upon whom these scientists relied for advice to develop new weapons. Through his contacts in the military, he was able to obtain research grants and found his company, ChemT.

Dr. Dietrich hired a team of brilliant engineers, and through his guidance, they developed one new tungsten-based product after another. After a time, though, the stream of new product ideas began to slow, and so did the government contracts.

As often happens in industry, Dr. Dietrich found himself facing a slowdown. He needed desperately to develop a new product that would save the company, but he and his team appeared to have exhausted their collective creative efforts. Tungsten was no longer the magical source of inspiration it once was, and Dr. Dietrich began to look at other chemical compounds for military

use. It was at just this critical time that he hit upon a new path of research. Instead of producing products for war, he would develop new products for *peace*.

Dr. Dietrich thought long and hard, and after many a trial and error, he came up with a brand-new chemical compound. He knew the science of chemistry backward and forward, and if his educated guess was correct, this compound could be used to end wars, not fight them. When dissolved in the drinking water or taken in pill form, the compound targeted specific receptors in the brain responsible for a warrior's fierceness and aggressiveness. Soldiers who drank the water would abhor killing the way ordinary civilians do. When the substance was provided secretly to enemy combatants, Dietrich believed they would drop their weapons and refuse to fight. Their leaders would seek peaceful solutions to the problems that gave rise to their conflict.

Russian soldiers would retreat from Ukraine and insist on returning to Russia. Israelis would retreat from Palestine and recognize a Palestinian State. African warlords would lay down their arms and support their legitimately elected local governments.

Klaus Dietrich contacted the office of the senior commanding officer at Aberdeen Proving Ground, General Waymore, and asked for a meeting. The meeting would be somewhat of a "Hail Mary" for him and his company because, if the U.S. Army could not be convinced to support the new development, ChemT would run out of money and would have to close its doors.

Dietrich had yet to hear back from the general when he received a call from Bill Ackerman. The man introduced himself to his assistant, Mary, as the president of a company called IBX and told her IBX was "interested in investing in ChemT." He was requesting a meeting with Dr. Dietrich and said he'd bring along his VP and chief financial officer to look at the company finances.

After a long pause, during which Dietrich pondered deeply the ramifications of a partial sale of his ownership in the company, he agreed to take the call. Waiting for Mary to transfer the call, he wondered how Ackerman could have learned his company was financially strapped at the moment. *Maybe someone on my team leaked this information, but who?* He nevertheless convinced himself that a meeting with Ackerman could pose no danger. Without a signed contract with IBX, neither Ackerman nor his associate had any right to receive the company's scientific or business information. And if both Ackerman and his CFO signed a nondisclosure agreement, or "NDA," protecting against unauthorized disclosure of the information they received, they would be the *only* ones who knew the big secret: his company's "secret sauce," something he now called "PAX."

"Hello. This is Klaus Dietrich. With whom am I speaking?"

"Hello, Dr. Dietrich. My name is Ackerman. Bill Ackerman. President of IBX. Please call me Bill."

"All right, Bill. My assistant, Mary, said you were interested in buying stock in my company? You must know this company is closely held. I own all the stock." Dietrich sat back in his desk chair and gazed out the window. This man, Bill Ackerman, might be the answer to his cash flow problem, he thought. He might be able to smooth this temporary bump in the road.

"We know that, Dr. Dietrich. May I call you Klaus? We have done our homework."

"Yes, certainly. You understand, I'm not interested in selling more than a very few shares. Certainly not a majority interest."

"I would assume that's true, Klaus. But I believe a meeting would be in order to discuss terms as well as your business, and to assess the value of your company."

"That's understood. So, you want to pay us a visit? When is a good time?"

“What does it look like for you next week?”

Dietrich quickly typed a few commands on his keyboard and checked his calendar.

“Tuesday morning would work for me.”

“Okay. Tuesday it is. Ten o’clock. I’ll bring my CFO—our new VP for finance.”

“That’s fine. Before that date, I’ll send you a proposed NDA. Review it and bring it with you. You’ll need to sign it before we can talk.”

“We don’t sign NDAs.”

“Then please don’t come. If you can’t sign it for any reason, we can’t talk.”

“But we merely want to buy some stock. We shouldn’t have to sign anything.”

“If you want to learn about our company, which I’m sure you do, you’ll have to sign it.”

“We can’t. We won’t.”

“Then I won’t expect you. Thank you, Mr. Ackerman.” Dietrich prepared to end the call but held off a moment.

“Uh...just a minute.” Dietrich’s phone went dead for a moment, then Ackerman came back on the line. “Okay, we’ll sign it.”

“See you Tuesday then. Goodbye.”

Klaus Dietrich hung up and sat quietly. He thought he might have made a mistake, but what was done was done. He had to think about what he could say to Ackerman and his VP.

Chapter 7: Jason's Great Idea

As Jason stood by, his father dad dialed a familiar phone number and waited impatiently for his call to go through. Daniel Brooks didn't really want to speak to anyone in his old firm, but he had told Jason he'd find out how Phil's last name was spelled and by golly he would. After the second ring, the call was picked up with the pleasant-sounding voice of the female receptionist. "This is IBX. How may I help you?"

"Jessica, it's me. Daniel."

"Oh, my gosh. *Mr. Brooks*. We're still reeling from your quitting so suddenly. How *are* you?"

"I'm actually quite fine, except I'm out of work. But who needs work, right?"

"I do! But that's just me. I happen to love my job."

"You're damn good at it too. Can you connect me to Joe? I need to ask him a quick question."

"Sure. I know he's in. Say hello to Mrs. Brooks for me, *please*. She's always so sweet. Now, be well, Mr. Brooks. I'll connect you."

Daniel Brooks stood in the kitchen with his cellphone to his ear and listened to the call go through. After a beat he heard Joe answer with a brusque, "Joe speaking."

"Hi, Joe. It's Daniel. How's it going over there?"

"Daniel. *Dan!* Gosh, I'm glad you called. I've been meaning to call you, but it's gotten extremely busy here all of a sudden. Our new boss, Phil Ciaobano...He's been"—Joe's voice dropped an octave and became suddenly soft, almost a whisper—"a holy terror. Everyone hates him. He must lie awake at night thinking up useless things for us to do."

“That’s awful. It just makes it more confusing what Bill saw in him. By the way, do you know how to spell his last name?”

“Oh, yeah. Some of the secretaries had trouble with it at first. It’s ‘Ciaobano.’ You start with ‘ciao.’ It means both ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye’ in Italian. Don’t know about you, but I find that funny. Then you add ‘*banno*,’ except with one ‘n.’ ‘*Ciaobano*,’ like that. Takes some getting used to.”

“Thanks. I could have never figured that out. My son tried to google him and got nowhere. By the way, there’s another thing I’d like to ask. A huge favor. You don’t have to do it if it’d make you uncomfortable.”

“Try me. I’ll do anything for an old friend.”

Daniel had thought twice about asking, but he saw no other way. “Could someone get into Ackerman’s office when he’s not there? I’ve never seen it locked. Have you?”

“Locked? No, me neither. Why?”

“Would you mind going in there for me?”

“I don’t normally have a reason to do that. But I could.”

“Would his secretary, Bess, know you’re in there?”

“She’s not always around. She takes off for lunch every day.”

“Would you have a problem with sneaking in there when she’s not looking?”

“No, but what do you have in mind? As a matter of fact, both Ackerman and Ciaobano are scheduled to be away on business next Tuesday.”

“My son has this crazy idea. He wants to have eyes on Ackerman. We think bringing in Ciaobano as a VP may be a sign that something’s gone rotten in IBX.”

“I have to agree. Tell you the truth, I was thinking the same thing. I’d like to have eyes on Ackerman too, but I know that’s impossible.”

“Well, maybe not. Jason has this idea...”

Daniel spent the next five minutes explaining what he and Jason had in mind. Joe listened the entire time without saying anything. “What do you think?” Daniel asked when he finished.

“Why, that’s incredible! It’s a *brilliant* idea, Dan. Count me in. I can set it up for you.”

“That would be wonderful, thank you. Can I stop by your house in the next few days? I need to give you a flash drive with the software.”

“Yes, of course. How about this evening? I’ll be home by six.” After a pause, he said, “Dan, let me tell you, I love the idea!” Joe’s voice went to a whisper again, but his enthusiasm shone through. “Maybe we can catch Ackerman and Ciaobano,” he added. “I’ll just bet those two are up to no good.”

Jason’s father, pocketed his cellphone and looked at his son. “Joe will install the app,” he said. “When he does, it’s time for you and your friends to go to work.”

Chapter 8: IBX Meets ChemT

On Tuesday morning, at precisely ten o'clock, Mary stepped into Klaus Dietrich's office and told him Bill Ackerman and Phil Ciaobano had arrived and were waiting in the anteroom to see him.

"Thank you, Mary. Bring 'em in. I'm ready as I'll ever be." Klaus stood up from behind his wide desk and winked at her. "We'll see if we can get some much-needed money into this company."

Mary left the room for a moment, then appeared again with the two gentlemen in tow. Dietrich greeted them warmly and, after handshakes and the usual pleasantries all around, he invited them to sit in the two comfortable side chairs in front of his desk. Returning to his seat, he asked, "You brought the NDA I sent you, right? I'd like you to sign it now. I'll ask Mary to make you copies for your records."

"We...uh...we can't sign it," Ackerman said hesitantly. "We're happy to receive only publicly available information about your company. Nothing more. That's our policy, and it's been that way for many years now."

"Oh, dear." Dietrich paused for a moment and stared at the two men in front of him. "I'm afraid our conversation will be short then. We're not a public company. All information—about our finances, our manufacturing methods, our business plans—is strictly confidential, as I'm sure you know. If you won't sign our NDA, I'm at a loss to understand why you're even here."

"Before we make a substantial investment in any company, especially a privately held company like yours, we like to meet the man at the helm."

“All right then.” Dietrich smoothed the hair on his head. He was somewhat relieved that the potential investors remained interested in his company and might infuse some much-needed cash, but he was on his guard. Theft of corporate secrets was all too common, and the scientific advances his company had made over the past several years were ripe for the picking. “Then let me give you a brief tour of our factory. You won’t be able to see what we’re working on, but at least you can see that we’re working.”

“That would be fine,” Ackerman said. Phil Ciaobano nodded in agreement.

As Dietrich and Ackerman stood up and were about to head out on the factory tour, Ciaobano held back. “Sorry, but I need to use the men’s room,” he said tentatively and shot a glance at Ackerman. “Too much coffee this morning.”

Dietrich smiled. “Sure. It’s just out the door to the right.”

“Okay. It will take just a moment. Please don’t wait. I’ll catch up.”

* * * *

As Dietrich and Ackerman left, Ciaobano quickly looked around to make sure he was alone, then stepped over to Dietrich’s desktop computer. It was still open, showing icons for the frequently used apps along the bottom of the screen. Ciaobano grabbed the mouse and made a few clicks to quickly download another app before leaving the room. As he was leaving, he passed by Mary’s desk. She looked up in surprise and remarked, “Oh, I thought everyone left. Can I help you with something?”

“No, I just need to use the restroom.”

“You just passed it,” she said, smiling pleasantly. “It’s there to your right.”

“Oh...thanks.”

Ciaobano disappeared into the men's room for a moment and came out wiping his hands with a paper towel. He looked at Mary questioningly, and she pointed down the hall. He hurried to catch up with his boss, Ackerman, and the CEO, Dietrich.

Chapter 9: Jason's Spyware

On Tuesday afternoon, Jason rode home on the school bus with his two classmates, Matt and Luke. Amy was on the bus too, sitting with her friend Karen, and Jason saw her anxiously looking over at him. Both she and Karen knew what Jason and his friends were going to do when they got home, and as Jason surmised, they very much wanted to be there too. Not that he minded, but if his plan didn't work—a good possibility because things tended to go wrong when he tried out a new idea—he knew he'd never hear the last of it. Jason, and probably also his friends, would be the butt of his sister's and Karen's sarcastic jokes for days to come.

Jason's dad had called him during recess earlier that afternoon and given him the news he'd been waiting for. Joe had downloaded the viewing app on Mr. Ackerman's desktop computer. "I can't believe it," he'd told Jason excitedly. "He went in during Bess's lunch hour and downloaded the software. There wasn't so much as a hiccup."

On the school bus, Jason looked over at Amy and Karen. He gave them a tiny nod, almost imperceptible to anyone else, but the two girls pumped their right arms and quietly uttered, "Yes!"

When the bus rumbled to a stop in front of Jason's condo unit, all five piled out and walked in the front door. The aroma of fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies greeted them, as did Mrs. Brooks. "I had a hunch you'd all come here after school," she said. "I baked cookies. They're on the dining room table along with milk. Help yourselves."

Jason wasn't much interested in milk and cookies at this point. He wanted to go straight to his room and find out if his idea would work, but everyone else paused to enjoy the cookies, so he did too.

When cookie time was finally over and everyone thanked Mrs. Brooks, Jason led the small crew to his room and shut the door. This was to be a secret session. What happened in his room stayed in his room.

Jason sat down at his desk and opened his laptop. The others gathered around behind him to watch the screen. Jason first checked his inbox to be sure his dad had not left a last-minute message, then clicked on one of the icons in the row at the bottom of his screen. The screen image dissolved away, and in its place appeared a different image with a row of different icons at the bottom.

Jason stared at his computer screen for a moment. His face then broke into a huge grin, and he turned in his chair, shouting, "It works!" His laptop had made the connection to Bill Ackerman's computer, and his screen mirrored exactly what Ackerman saw on his screen at IBX.

As he and the others looked on intently, the cursor on Ackerman's computer moved down to one of the icons at the bottom of his screen. It was late in the day, but not so late that Ackerman would have normally left the office. He was still at work, as the motion of his cursor clearly showed. The group watched as the cursor moved to and clicked on the mailbox icon at the bottom of Ackerman's screen. A list of unread emails appeared, and the cursor moved to one that had come from "ChemT.com." The subject line read "*Thank you for your visit.*"

Ackerman's cursor clicked on it, and the email filled the screen. It was from the president of ChemT, a man named Klaus Dietrich. Jason tried to read it as quickly as he could because it could disappear at any moment.

But wait, Jason thought. I can bring this email up myself when Mr. Ackerman is away by moving the cursor from here. Ackerman needed to leave his desktop running, but most people did that. If he shut it down...then maybe not. But if I printed it, right here, right now...

Jason captured the remote screen using a keyboard command and saved the image on his laptop as a PDF. He and his friends stared at the document in amazement, hardly believing their eyes.
Hi Bill.

I just want to thank you for coming in today to view our operation firsthand. We trust you liked what you saw. If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact me or one of my associates.

You asked me to estimate the asset value of our company. As I explained, we have successfully completed the development of a new secret weapon for the U.S. Army. While I can't disclose what the weapon is and what it does, based on projected revenues, I estimate the value of this one product to be in excess of \$150M. I therefore estimate the total value of ChemT, based on past and projected revenues, to be approximately \$300M.

I'm willing to sell you a one-third interest in the company, but no more. Should you decide to purchase shares equivalent to this one-third interest, the price would be the non-negotiable sum of \$100M.

A purchase of a one-third interest would entitle you to a seat on the board of directors. I'll also guarantee (1) that your shares would not be diluted should we decide to sell more stock, and (2) that money received from the sale of your stock would be used solely to support our ongoing research and development.

You can be assured the money will not be used for our normal operational functions, such as rent, marketing, and employee salaries. Our expected revenue from the sale of our products to the military will easily support our ongoing routine expenses.

I look forward to hearing from you shortly.

Cordially, Klaus Dietrich

Jason brought up the print menu, selected five copies, and clicked “Print.” A second later, his printer started whirring and spit out five sheets of paper bearing the email. Jason lifted the sheets from the printer basket and handed one to each of the detectives.

Jason and his friends hardly knew what to make of this email. Jason’s dad had begun to look into ChemT and had learned they were developing a new secret weapon for the military. Ackerman had seemed interested in buying this company, but instead of allowing Mr. Brooks to conduct the usual “due diligence” as he had done previously, he had hired Ciaobano for the position: vice president and chief financial officer. Both VP and CFO. What did this mean?

Before Jason could think through what was happening, he saw the cursor move again and click “Reply” to Dietrich’s email, opening a window. Alphanumeric characters appeared one by one in the message box as Ackerman typed.

Klaus,

We are truly interested. However, \$100M is more than we’re willing to pay for a 1/3 stock interest in your company. Let’s talk.

Bill

“How many shares will that be, I wonder?” Matt asked aloud as the typing stopped and the cursor moved to click “Send.”

“That depends on the number of outstanding shares, dummy,” Amy chided. “If the owner of the company had a thousand shares and he wanted to sell a one-third interest, he’d sell three hundred thirty-three and a third shares. Easy peasy.”

“Could he really sell a third of a share?” Matt asked. “How would that work?”

“Happens all the time,” Jason answered. “Before Dad quit, Ackerman used to give him part shares in IBX as a Christmas bonus.”

“But why would Ackerman buy less than half the stock?” Luke asked. “He’d only get one seat on the board. Not enough for control.”

“I have no idea,” Jason said, “but wait a minute. It just dawned on me. As a board member, he’d have access to all the company secrets. Like all the finances and the new military weapon they developed.”

“You think maybe he didn’t intend to pay?” Karen chimed in. “Or he planned to cheat in some way?”

“Cheat?” Matt asked his sister. “That’s stupid, Karen. There’s no way he could do that.”

Jason and his fellow detectives kept watch on the computer screen for another half hour, but nothing more happened. Ackerman’s cursor had stopped moving.

“That’s finally it,” Jason said. “I think he’s gone for today.”

“You mean that’s the end?” Amy asked. “We can’t spy on him anymore?”

“We can,” Jason told her. “Until he discovers the remote viewing software we put in his computer, we can continue watching whatever he’s doing.”

“Is this a two-way thing?” Luke wanted to know. “Can we make like that’s *our* computer and do things with it? Send emails with it and stuff like that?”

“Yes, we can. Now that he’s gone, let me show you this.” As everyone watched, Jason moved a second cursor on Ackerman’s screen. It seemed to come out of nowhere, but it was now very visible. Jason moved the cursor to the FaceTime icon at the bottom of the screen and clicked. The screen turned entirely black for a second but suddenly presented the image of an office. “That’s the view from the computer camera,” Jason explained, turning in his seat to face the group. “It’s Ackerman’s office.”

The assembled detectives were stunned into silence. They were so astonished no one spoke. Were it not for a gasp from Karen, you could have heard a pin drop.

“If Ackerman saw our cursor move, we’d be dead in the water,” Jason said. “I don’t know what he’d do, but I don’t want to find out. If we stay out of sight and just watch his computer, there’s no way he can catch us.”

Everyone nodded. They understood well the rules of their spy game.

Jason closed his laptop and got up from his chair. “Let’s watch again after school tomorrow,” he said. “In the meantime, we should try and figure out what’s going on. What do you suppose Ackerman and Ciaobano are up to?”

Amy spoke up. “They’re up to no good, those two. I just know it.”

The others were clearly in agreement.

Feigning a strong British accent, Amy added, “Just you wait, Mr. Ackerman. You just wait. You’ll get your comeuppance. We’re comin’ to get you.”

Chapter 10: Anticipation

Klaus Dietrich sat at his desk and pondered Ackerman's email. He was, in a word, *pleased* that IBX was willing to invest money in ChemT. But he was concerned about their motivation and their willingness to pay a fair price for company shares. Maybe he should sell them fewer shares. A ten-percent interest was the point at which a stockholder gained extra rights and influence, Dietrich knew. He'd be more than happy to sell them a lower interest and avoid that. Dietrich was in the middle of these considerations when he heard Mary's voice on the intercom.

"General Waymore is on the secure line, sir. He wants to meet with you."

"Thanks, Mary. That's good." Dietrich picked up the landline phone and pressed a red button on the base station. Every communication with the commanding officer of Aberdeen Proving Ground required maximum security.

"Good evening, General. It's Klaus here. You're calling about the meeting." This was not a question but a statement.

"I'm awfully busy, Klaus. Is this a rush?"

"We've completed development on the new weapon. We need to talk ASAP."

"That's not what I asked you. Can it wait? Why rush?"

"Yes, sir. It can wait. But when you find out what we're doing, you'll kick me in the butt for not showing it to you earlier."

"I'd never kick you, Klaus. You've been a good friend to the Army, so we try to be good to you right back."

“So when could you come over?”

“Is tomorrow soon enough? At the end of the day?”

“That would be perfect. Things will be quiet here then. Say about nineteen hundred hours?” Dietrich knew the general normally worked until eight in the evening. He therefore suggested they meet at seven.

“I’ll be there.”

Dietrich was about to thank him, but General Waymore had already ended the call. Dietrich hung up the phone receiver and stood up from his chair. He grabbed his sport jacket from a hanger in his office and stepped out. “Mary, I’m going home. You should too.”

Mary looked up from the computer on her desk. “But it’s just six o’clock,” she said, frowning like a mother would to her child. “You’re getting lazy, Dr. Dietrich?”

“Maybe. But it’s been a damn good day so far and I don’t want to jinx it.”

* * * *

Klaus Dietrich arrived early the next morning and checked the lock on the main door. Satisfied that it was secure, he unlocked it with a key in his pocket and greeted the night watchman, who was waiting to leave. The morning security shift had just arrived and were making their rounds and routine checks of all the entrances to the building. Dietrich told the night watchman to relock the main door before he left and headed for his office down the hall. It was six fifteen already, and he had a few things to do before meeting with Waymore—a meeting which he hoped would place ChemT on a sound financial footing. Short of selling stock to a vulture like Ackerman, he knew that the Army’s acceptance of PAX was do or die for his company.

Dietrich entered his office and sat behind his desktop computer. He never turned it off, leaving it ready and waiting every morning for him to receive and send emails or to call up financial spreadsheets. Dietrich clicked on the Excel icon and brought up the spreadsheet for PAX.

Dietrich stared at the numbers, all of which he'd seen many times before and knew well. His company had spent way too much on this development. The project had consumed dollars—many more than were originally budgeted. Dietrich had taken a risk with the company's money, and as the development progressed and showed some promise, he could not turn the dollar spigot off. Like a gambler with a slot machine, he felt compelled to add quarter after quarter, pulling the handle every time, in the hope of a win. The end had seemed within reach, again and again, but whenever he came close, there was always some new problem he needed to address. Having now run out of dollars—having “bet the farm”—would he now hit the jackpot?

All day, Dietrich mentally prepared for the general's visit, going through possible questions and imagining how he might interact with the man who would make the decision. Would the general take a chance on this new concept and agree to hand it to his scientists for testing? He was the commanding officer of Aberdeen Proving Ground: the U.S. Army's premier chemical weapons laboratory and test facility. All Dietrich would be asking for was a *test*. As simple as that. How could the general say no? Dietrich knew now that PAX did work, and it would surely bring about a change in the way future wars were fought. If only PAX could be given a chance...

* * * *

After climbing off the bus, Jason, Matt, Luke, Amy, and Karen raced to Jason's room and shut the door. Jason lifted the lid on his laptop and clicked on the icon to remotely view

Ackerman's computer. His screen went blurry for a moment, then settled in on a clear image of another computer screen.

"What?" Astonished, Jason tried to make sense of what he saw. This wasn't even close to the screen they'd seen yesterday. Had Ackerman changed the look of his screen for some reason? Why would he do that?

"What's going on, Jason?" Matt asked, his critical tone breaking into Jason's thought process. "Are you doing it right?"

Everyone else also stared and started talking, all at once, asking Jason what went wrong. Like Matt, they assumed Jason had made a mistake—that is, until they saw the cursor in the screen image begin to move.

The cursor moved downward and clicked on an icon in the bottom row: a box with two shades of green and a small "x." A list of documents popped up, and the cursor moved to one with a three-letter title: "PAX."

"What the heck does that stand for?" Jason asked, half to himself, as he watched the cursor click on it to bring up a spreadsheet filled with columns of financial figures.

Jason examined the column headings but saw nothing he understood. Words like "glass supplies," "chemical trays," and "centrifuges" made no sense. If only he could hear what was being said by the person using this computer. Wait a minute... Whose computer was this?

Slowly, it dawned on Jason that Ackerman was viewing the screen of *someone else's computer*. But whose computer could that be? Thinking through the possibilities, Jason realized that as he was spying on Ackerman, *Ackerman was spying on ChemT*.

“Well, isn’t that amazing!” Jason moved out of the way to let the other young detectives examine the screen. “You’re looking at the finances of ChemT,” Jason told them. “They’re supposed to be top secret!”

Chapter 11: The General's Visit

On Wednesday evening at precisely seven o'clock, Mary stepped into Klaus Dietrich's office and told him General Waymore had arrived.

"Thanks, Mary. Escort him in. I'm as ready as I'll ever be." Klaus stood up from behind his wide desk and winked at her. "We'll see if we can entice him to try out *PAX ChemT*."

Dietrich had met with General Waymore, the commanding general of Aberdeen Proving Ground, on many occasions, but their meetings had always been at the general's office in Maryland. This was the first time the general traveled to visit *him* here in Holmdel, New Jersey. Although it took Dietrich three hours to drive to APG by car, it had taken the general only twenty minutes to make the trip by helicopter. Dietrich greatly appreciated the general's coming to see him. As both he and the general knew, there was no other way for the general to see and assess the new weapon.

"Good morning, General," Dietrich said politely as the big man strode into his office.

Mary held the door open wide and closed it behind her after the general entered.

"Dietrich!" Waymore bellowed as he approached and held out his hand.

Dietrich took it and they both squeezed hard, a demonstration of their friendship and trust. General Waymore was dressed in his working camo fatigues, adorned with a colorful insignia over his left breast as well as four brass stars on each shoulder. He held his general's hat in his left hand.

Dietrich motioned for him to sit in the large chair in front of his desk and took a seat on his own chair behind it. "First of all, thank you for coming, General. I know your time is valuable, so let's get right to it. I want to show you what we've been working on these past two

years. I believe you'll be surprised," Dietrich said, pausing a moment for effect before adding, "...and also impressed."

"I'd better be," he responded. "I'm sick of hearing you say you have a new weapon and not telling me a thing about it. It had better be damned good."

"First, let me tell you what it is. Then I'll bring you out to the plant and show you."

"Well, I'm here, Dietrich. Fire away."

"Okay. It's called 'PAX.' Latin for 'peace.' That's just a name, but it pretty much tells you what it does. You administer it to an enemy soldier—or any soldier—and he'll lose his will to fight."

"He won't fight? *What?* What does he do then? Lie down and beg for mercy?" the general asked sarcastically.

This wasn't the response Dietrich was expecting. "No, not really," he said. "But he'll be a talker, not a fighter."

"You said this was a 'weapon'? A weapon is used to kill the enemy, not to play games."

"I was hoping you'd ask me how to deploy it. How to use it in the field."

"I don't care how you deploy it. If it doesn't kill people, I won't use it."

"That's not quite fair, sir. Historically, chemical weapons have always been used to kill people. The results have been absolutely ghastly. People have suffered horribly before they died. This is a new kind of weapon. It doesn't make people suffer, and it's even more effective than the chemical weapons you're used to."

"That's crazy thinking, Dietrich. The military's for killing people. That's what armies do." The general held out his hands on either side, palms up, to emphasize the obvious.

"If you could achieve the same results without killing, wouldn't you give it a try?"

“Hell no! What do you think the military’s for, anyway? It’s to kill the enemy when the time for talking is over.”

“Wouldn’t you at least like to see the new weapon and how we make it? Isn’t that the reason you came all this way?”

“I’m not sure why I came all this way, Dietrich. I expected you to show me some new killer stuff and ask me to test it.”

“Well, you’re here now, and you’ve never seen our facilities. Let me give you a brief tour of the plant.” Dietrich got up from his chair and made a motion to head for the door. “I can also explain the ways you can use the weapon. It’s quite ingenious, really...”

“Don’t waste my time, Dietrich. If this ...uh, *thing* of yours doesn’t maim or kill, I’m not interested. I’m very busy and it’s getting late.” General Waymore stood and started toward the door. “I’m heading out right now.” He turned and saluted, his way of saying goodbye, and left to fly back to his base.

Five minutes later, Dietrich heard the helicopter start up on the helipad adjacent to his building. With the roar of its engine and the thunderous beating of blades, the machine rose and flew away.

Dietrich was struck dumb. He had completely failed to gain the interest of the military for his new development, PAX. Facing certain bankruptcy for his company, he would now have to turn to Ackerman and Ciaobano for much-needed money. It was distasteful, and he’d wait until morning to write to them.

Despondent, Dietrich returned to his desk, and for a moment, he sat lost in thought. After a beat, he brought up the email window on his computer and typed out an email to General Waymore.

Dear General Waymore,

It is with a heavy heart that I write this email. Forgive me for thinking you would be interested in PAX, a weapon that has the possibility of creating peaceful solutions to world problems.

Should you change your mind, we at ChemT stand ready, willing and able to provide and to support this new weapon.

In the meantime, the chemical formula and the difficult, complicated process for making it will remain secure as a closely guarded trade secret of ChemT.

We shall, of course, continue to develop the titanium ammunition and titanium warheads that have proven so successful in penetrating the strongest enemy armor.

I thank you for your kind visit with us,

Klaus Dietrich, PhD.

He pressed "Send."

* * * *

Bill Ackerman stared at his computer screen and watched Dietrich type out the email. He felt joy rise in his heart as the first paragraph neared completion. Eyes wide from the surge of excitement, he shouted, "Phil, come here! Come here *this instant!*"

Phil Ciaobano ran over from his adjacent office to join Ackerman in watching the email materialize. When he saw the cursor press "Send," Ciaobano looked over at Ackerman and whispered, "This is exactly what we've been waiting for. It's time to execute."

* * * *

Jason and the detectives were intently watching Jason's laptop screen as the email was being created, letter by letter. When finished, the cursor moved downward and pressed "Send."

Jason looked at Amy, Karen, Matt, and Luke and asked rhetorically, “Now what do we do?”

No one had an answer.

Jason was about to say something when the screen on his laptop turned dark, catching everyone’s immediate attention.

“Oh, oh,” Matt cried. “Something bad’s happening. Jason’s computer stopped working.”

As quickly as the screen had turned dark, it brightened again, this time to a completely different display. “That’s Ackerman’s screen,” Jason said, smiling. “It looks the same as it did yesterday. The president of ChemT must have shut down his computer and gone home for the day.”

As the five young detectives watched, Ackerman brought up an email window, titled the subject “ChemT,” entered the email address Isaac@thebankofnewyork.com, and typed:

Hi Isaac,

It’s time to set the plan in motion. We’ll have another meeting with Dietrich and tell him we’re buying the whole company. We’ve got him in a corner now, and we’ll press him to sell. He can’t say no this time. We’ll get his bank account information, and once he signs the contract of sale, you send the money for us and, a week later, claw it back as we planned.

Thanks in advance.

Bill and Phil

“That proves it!” Karen declared. “Amy was right. Those two guys are up to no good.”

Chapter 12: The Detectives Get to Work

Jason sat for a moment, thinking, then turned around to face his fellow detectives. “I know just what to do. Matt, I want you to ask your dad to investigate Phil Ciaobano. That’s spelled C-I-A-O-B-A-N-O. I have a hunch he’s been involved in some shady deals before Ackerman made him VP of IBX.”

Matt nodded as he copied the spelling onto a sticky note.

“Luke, have your dad send a representative to ChemT to look into their finances. Have him tell Dr. Dietrich your dad’s hedge fund sent him there to exercise ‘due diligence.’”

Luke launched a rubber band toward the ceiling. “You got it.”

“Amy, get the names and addresses of all the board members of IBX. Dad’s friend Joe can help you with that. Get their email addresses also. We’ll need to contact them at some point to schedule a board meeting and make a presentation.”

Amy widened her eyes and sucked in a deep breath, possibly a little overwhelmed. But Jason knew she could handle it.

“Karen, find out the last name of that guy at the Bank of New York, Isaac, who appears to be crooked, and investigate the heck out of him. How long has he been with the bank? Where does he live? Is he a gambler, living beyond his means? An alcoholic? Has he been suspected of wrongdoing before? That kind of stuff. He’s key to Ackerman’s plan.”

Jason turned back to his computer and typed several commands. The printer again whirred and spit out five copies of the four emails they’d seen: from Dietrich to Ackerman, from Ackerman to Dietrich, from Dietrich to Waymore, and from Ackerman and Ciaobano to the man named Isaac. Jason handed a copy of each to the four young detectives, and they turned to leave.

“Wait a minute.” Matt turned to look back at Jason before he left. “What are *you* going to do?”

“I’m going after Waymore. While you guys go after Ciaobano, I’ll try to convince the general to test that new weapon Dr. Dietrich calls PAX.”

* * * *

After everyone left, Jason quietly closed the door to his room, returned to his desk, and sat down in front of his computer. It was time to write an article, this time to convince General Waymore to do the right thing. But what should he say? Hidden in Dr. Dietrich’s email to General Waymore was one important clue: *Forgive me for thinking you would be interested in PAX, a weapon that has the possibility of creating peaceful solutions to world problems.*

PAX was a word meaning “peace,” Jason knew. He let his mind wander. The opposite of *peace* was *war*. Those who fought wars were primarily *men*, not women. Why was that? Not every man wanted to fight. Many were caring and kind. They were “peaceful warriors.” But many men—too many, in fact—*were* fighters.

It must be a “thing,” this...what should I call it?...This madness. Male Madness. What if men’s aggressiveness, this “Male Madness,” could be altered chemically and brought under control? *That must be what PAX was able to do.*

There had to be statistics about this Male Madness, assuming it was a *real phenomenon*. Like when a man (it was always a *male*) takes a gun and starts shooting students in a school. Like Columbine High School. Like Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown. Like Virginia Tech. A woman wouldn’t even think of doing such a horrible thing.

Jason typed several commands into his computer, furiously researching...

It's Male Madness when an active shooter enters a workplace and shoots as many people as he can. Ninety-seven percent of the active shooters are men.

It's Male Madness when a serial killer shoots one innocent person after another. Ninety-eight percent of serial killers are men.

It's Male Madness when a mass murderer kills a group of people all at once. Ninety-two percent of mass murderers are men.

It's Male Madness when someone blows up a building with children in it. Like the Federal Building in Oklahoma City. People who do that are almost always men.

It's Male Madness when a spouse has been beaten or killed. Jason thought of O.J. Simpson. Violent spouse abusers are almost always men.

It's Male Madness when a politician advocates the use of force against another country, another ethnic group, or a particular religious group of people. Like the war in Ukraine. Politicians who do that are almost always men.

“What is it with men?” Jason wondered. Laws existed to provide protection against Male Madness, but they didn’t stop men from killing.

ChemT—Dr. Dietrich—must have finally found a way to end Male Madness. *That's it! That's the thing he called "PAX."*

Jason felt ready to write the article. He started by crafting a heading, “*U.S. ARMY REFUSES TO ACCEPT NEW CHEMICAL WEAPON CALLED PAX.*” Once done, he spent the next hour typing, revising and polishing the text. He described what he knew and made up the rest. When he finished, he looked at an old issue of the newspaper, found the email address for outside submissions to *the New York Times*, and pressed “Send.”

Chapter 13: The New York Times

At the dinner table that evening, Jason was eager to report on what he and the detectives had been doing. After the prayer, Mrs. Brooks asked her husband about his job search. There was still no news on that front, so she turned to Jason. “I’ve heard Amy and Karen are now full-fledged members of your detective team. Is that right?”

Jason glanced over at Amy, who glared at him as if to say, *“I don’t care that Matt and Luke don’t want girls on the team. It’s not 1965 anymore. You’d better tell her we’re in.”*

“Yeah, we’re working together now,” Jason said offhandedly. “The girls have been tracking a few things down for us.”

Amy kicked Jason under the table. *“Not good enough, dumbass.”*

“That sounds like secretarial work, Jason. All they do is ‘track things down’?”

“Honest, Mom,” Jason said wearily. “We try to involve the girls in everything.”

“That’s nice. Amy, is that right? You’re not excluded now, are you?”

“No, Mom. We’re doing the heavy lifting now. Letting the boys off the hook.” Amy kicked Jason a second time—this time gently to show her appreciation. “If it wasn’t for us, they’d still be pounding sand in their little sandbox.”

“So, Jason. What’s going on?” asked Mr. Books.

“Well, we’re right in the middle of it, so I’d rather not say. I don’t want to jinx it. Give us another couple of days.”

“Are you sure you don’t want some help? I’m curious now. You think something can go wrong?”

“Don’t worry, Dad. We’ve got this. So far, at least. By the way, I wrote an article and emailed it to *the New York Times*. I haven’t heard back.”

“You did? Well, don’t expect to hear anything. They’re busy and, uh...constantly inundated with emails. The article’s not about my quitting, I hope.”

“No, Dad. It’s not. It’s about the minimum wage.”

“I don’t know why they’d be interested in that, but okay. Good for you, son. I’ll bet it’s pretty hard to make ends meet on the minimum wage.”

“It’s nearly impossible, Dad. That’s the point. You need to earn a lot more to survive.”

“I have a confession to make.” Mrs. Books interrupted the conversation with an embarrassed look on her face. “I almost forgot. The phone rang this afternoon. I thought it was spam, so I didn’t pick up and let it go to voicemail. The caller mentioned *the New York Times*, left their number and wants you to call back.”

“*Mom*, when did they call?” Jason asked, upset that she’d missed such an important call. “When did they call? Where’s the number?”

“I wrote it down on the pad next to the landline. I’m so sorry, Jason. I should have said something. I totally forgot.”

Jason jumped up from the table, ran to the hall and grabbed the notepad. “This one, Mom?” he asked, coming back to show her. “This ‘212’ number?”

“Yes, that’s it,” she said. “The voicemail said to dial straight through to the extension.”

“I’ll bet they’re still there,” Mr. Brooks said. “You might try calling them now.”

As Jason sank slowly onto his dining room chair, he pulled his mobile phone from his pocket and dialed the number. He held the phone to his ear and listened intently. “Yes, this is Jason...”

After a minute, he pressed “End Call” and put the phone down.

The three others at the dinner table stared at him expectantly. Jason’s face was expressionless for a moment, then broke into a smile. “They’ve been in touch with Dr. Dietrich to verify some facts. They want to publish my article about PAX on the op-ed page.”

Jason’s parents stared at him with their mouths open. Amy shrieked. Jason just smiled, with as humble a face as he could muster.

Chapter 14: Phil Ciaobano

Matt O'Connor looked at his phone, pondering the text he'd received from his father a few minutes earlier: *Matt, you won't believe what I found out about Phil Ciaobano. I'll tell you at suppertime.* Matt had been actively researching Ciaobano himself and had been astounded by something he'd found out.

Ciaobano had changed his last name when he turned twenty-one. Originally Philip Jenkinson, an English name, he had changed it to "Ciaobano," a name so unusual Matt assumed he had made it up. "Ciao" was the Italian word for both "hello" and "goodbye"; the suffix "bano" came from the Spanish word "baño," meaning "bathroom." Very clever, Matt thought. But why in the world did he change his name?

When Matt came home from school, he waited with anticipation for his dad to join him, his mom, and his younger sister Karen for supper. His dad worked irregular hours as a policeman, so his family was never sure of the timing. He had texted his mom that afternoon, though, giving her plenty of time to prepare roast pork with potatoes and carrots and an upside-down peach pie for dessert.

Matt stayed in his room with his door open so he could hear when his dad arrived. He continued to research Ciaobano until he could go no further and then turned to his homework assignments. He'd almost completed his homework when he heard his dad unlock the front door and step into the hallway. He jumped up from his chair and found his dad in the kitchen. "I got your text about Phil Ciaobano, Dad. What did you find out?"

"Wait a minute, son," he said. "I just got home. I want to relax and say hello to your mom. Let's talk during supper."

“Okay, I guess it can wait until supper,” Matt replied, his voice registering his disappointment. This stuff was urgent, he thought to himself. *Right after supper, I’ll call Jason and tell him what Dad says.*

Matt waited impatiently until his mother finished preparing and serving supper. When everyone was seated, his father finally started talking about his day and held the family spellbound with a tale of Phil Ciaobano. He and his tech support officer for the New York State Police had worked most of the day to pull together this man’s story.

Born Philip Jenkinson, Phil had grown up in the South Bronx and attended public school. His father split when he was two, leaving his mother to care for the family while working two jobs. Practically penniless, she married the first man who took an interest in her, enabling her to pay her rent and buy groceries. This man was a recovering alcoholic who fell off the wagon from time to time and took his anger out on Phil. This personal history came from a police record that was opened when Phil’s mother, in sudden fear for her life, called 911.

Phil had thus grown up in a troubled home. He was arrested several times for a series of petty thefts before he was eighteen, but he avoided being sent to a juvenile reform school through sheer luck. Bronx prosecutors were vastly overloaded, the police research revealed, and Phil was never charged. The NYPD had begun to take notice of him, however, and added this information to the record of his transgressions.

When he turned twenty-one, Phil changed his surname to “Ciaobano” and moved north to White Plains, where he attended Westchester Community College and got a low-paying clerical job at the Bank of New York. The bank’s human resources team knew nothing of his spotty record as a teenager, Matt assumed, and they gave him increasingly more responsibility until, after ten years, he was promoted to the rank of “manager,” in charge of granting and

administering small business loans. A short time later, the president of one of the bank's clients, IBX, hired him away to become its vice president and chief financial officer.

"That explains how Jason's dad got bumped," Matt noted. "Jason told us his dad was really steamed and quit on the spot. Now he's having trouble getting another job."

"That's understandable," Mr. O'Connor said. "It makes you wonder why this guy was hired. Jason's dad was in charge of finances for IBX for years, and instead of him getting the CFO position, this guy gets hired out of the blue? My detective gut tells me something's wrong there."

"Maybe Ciaobano and Mr. Ackerman were friends," Karen suggested innocently. "Like from elementary school or something."

"Could be," Mr. O'Connor replied. "Or maybe this had something to do with a huge loan IBX received from the Bank of New York. Ackerman might have thought Ciaobano would be more valuable to IBX as an in-house financial guru than as the loan officer at the bank."

"I'll bet I know who took Ciaobano's place in the bank," Karen said. "Jason asked me to investigate this guy who works there. His name's Isaac something. I don't know his last name yet, but I'm going to find out."

Chapter 15: Isaac

Karen had listened intently as her father told the story of Phil Ciaobano. She was keenly interested because she had been doing some research on her own. She had begun by googling the Bank of New York branch in White Plains, but that had led nowhere. The bank's website was of the "tombstone" variety—straightlaced and stodgy—and provided only the bare minimum of information. She was able to learn only that the bank's home office was in Manhattan and that it had branches in the nearby suburbs of Stamford, Connecticut; Woodbury, New Jersey; and White Plains, New York. The website listed the phone numbers of the three branches as well as the home office. She called the White Plains number.

A crisp female voice answered, "The Bank of New York. How may I direct your call?"

"I'd like to speak with Isaac," Karen said, sounding as mature and professional as she could.

"Do you know his last name?"

"Sorry, no." Karen hoped against hope this would not end the call.

"I'll have to look it up. Just give me a moment." There was a lengthy pause. Too long, Karen felt, and she began to get worried. How could she find out about Isaac without knowing his last name? How could she learn his last name if not this way? If only...if only the receptionist could find it and tell her.

"I found the name." The receptionist seemed pleased with herself. A good sign! "Who may I say is calling?"

Karen hesitated, but she couldn't think of anything except the truth. "My name's Karen O'Connor. I'm calling about the account of IBX."

“Does he know you?”

“Uh...I don't think so.” *That's a dumb answer*, Karen thought. She quickly added, “I don't think he'll remember me.”

“Alright then, I'll connect you—”

“Just a moment, ma'am,” Karen interrupted. “Before I speak to him, could you tell me his last name?” She didn't want to speak to him at all, but she didn't want the receptionist to know that.

“It's Pearlman. Spelled P-E-A-R-L-M-A-N.”

Karen could sense the receptionist's annoyance, so rather than make her even more annoyed, she just hung up. She'd gotten the information she wanted anyway. She'd poked the beast and it might bite her, she thought. It was best to run away.

Safe and sound in her bedroom, Karen googled the name of Isaac Pearlman. She found more than a dozen across the country, mostly in LA, Chicago, and New York City. But there were only two in the vicinity of White Plains. Either one could be the person at the Bank of New York.

What Karen did next was close to her favorite thing to do when investigating someone. She would first find the address where the person lived, then type this address into Google Maps. That would bring up a map with a pin on the house or condominium unit where the person lived. Next, she'd drop down to street level and have a good look at the place. As a final step, she'd turn around and get a full 360-degree view of the area. She could and often would take a tour of the neighborhood by clicking the street arrows and “driving around” on the map.

Finding the two Pearlman's addresses was easy. She used her father's State Police credentials for the DMV Request Navigator and entered the name “Isaac Pearlman.” Six

Pearlmans came up: three in New York City, two in Westchester County, and one upstate. She chose the two in Westchester and obtained their addresses, one in Yonkers, the other in Armonk.

She chose first the home in Armonk, thinking it perhaps the more upscale of the two, and inserted the Armonk Pearlman's address in the search bar of Google Maps. With a click, she found herself at the end of a dead-end street. Right in front of her rose an enormous mansion. Slightly elevated and surrounded by a lush lawn, the house was all white with a columned entranceway embracing a red door. There were fourteen windows on the front, three on either side of the door on the first floor and eight evenly spaced on the second floor, all framed by black shutters on either side. *A classic New England-style colonial home, Karen thought. It must be worth millions.*

This was too much house for a mid-level manager of a bank, she figured, so she brought up the Google Maps showing the Yonkers address. *This is more like it*, she said to herself as she stared at a two-level living unit in a condominium community. A bank employee like Isaac Pearlman could easily afford to live here. *This must be the guy.*

Now that she had the full name and address of Isaac from the Bank of New York, she went to work investigating his past. Using LinkedIn and several other Internet-based sources, some requiring her father's police credentials, she pieced together the places he had lived up to the present. Like Ciaobano, his childhood wasn't pretty. It seemed, in fact, that the two had similar backgrounds and similar police records as teenagers. They both had grown up in the Bronx, although their neighborhood stomping grounds were miles apart. Had they known each other? Probably, she thought. *But wait a minute... Maybe one or the other knew Mr. Ackerman, the president of IBX.*

Switching horses, Karen started researching “William Ackerman,” and bingo! Her suspicions were correct. Ackerman could well be the link between Ciaobano and Pearlman. He too was born in the Bronx.

It was easier to find information about Ackerman than Pearlman—or Ciaobano, for that matter—because Ackerman was a well-known figure in the business world. Within a few clicks, she quickly learned Ackerman had attended the Wharton School of Business in Philadelphia and, with a master’s degree in hand, went to work for Goldman Sachs, a famous Wall Street banking firm. Five years later, Ackerman obtained the necessary financing and founded IBX.

It was quite clear that Ackerman knew Ciaobano, the loan officer at the Bank of New York, before he brought him on board as vice president of IBX. The chances were good that Ackerman knew Isaac Pearlman too because he’d also had dealings with him at the Bank of New York. IBX needed lots of money to finance its purchases of distressed businesses, and the Bank of New York was its source of its loans.

Satisfied with the results of her research, Karen felt she was ready to report her findings to Jason and the detectives.

Chapter 16: General Waymore

The week flew by for Jason. He'd told not only Matt and Luke but also his seventh-grade teacher that his article would be published, and she alerted the entire school, it seemed. Jason was an instant celebrity.

Jason tried his best not to let his new fame go to his head. When someone he didn't know asked if he was the one whose article would be published in *the New York Times*, he would simply smile, say "yes," and thank the person for asking. He'd called the newspaper a couple of times to inquire when the article would be published, but Cindy, the person with whom he spoke, didn't know, and he eventually just let it go. If it were published, that would happen when it happened.

The entire week, Jason felt stressed about getting in touch with General Waymore, *an honest-to-God general for gosh sake*. He procrastinated day after day, but by the end of the week, he could put it off no longer. Jason finally summoned his courage, dialed the number of Aberdeen Proving Ground, and waited nervously for the call to go through. When the call connected, he gave his name and said he wanted to speak to the commanding officer. He fully expected the clerk to give him the runaround, but she put him through to the general's office. Once there, he explained to the general's assistant who he was and why he was calling, again fully expecting to be put on hold.

Instead, after a beat, he heard a deep voice: "General Waymore."

Oops. I'm talking to the general! Now what should I do?

"General, sir. My name is Jason Brooks. I'm twelve years old and in seventh grade. I want to speak to you about PAX. It's a chemical weapon that—"

“I know what PAX is...But how do *you* know...uh, Jason, is it?”

“Jason. Yes sir, I can’t tell you that, but I do want to ask you to give PAX a chance. Have your scientists test it in your laboratory. If it works, it could make fighting the enemy much easier.”

“Jason, do you know who you’re speaking to?”

“Yes, sir. You’re the commanding general in charge of chemical weapons for the Army. That’s why I’m calling you. I just want to say, PAX—”

“PAX is not something we’re interested in. But now let me tell *you*, young man: You know PAX is a secret, right? You shouldn’t even know about this.” Jason heard the general take a deep breath in frustration. “I’ll ask you again: How did you find out about this?”

Jason didn’t know what to say at first, but after a beat he managed, “I can’t really tell you that, sir.” His heart was racing. He forced himself to focus. “Sir, I’m calling to ask you to have it tested. It’s an important weap—”

“What’s your last name, Jason?”

“My last name?”

“Yes, your last name. What’s your *full name*?”

“My name is Jason Brooks, sir. I live in Somers, New York. You seem upset, but I’m just trying to—”

“Upset? Damn right I’m upset.” The general raised his voice a notch. “How dare you tell me what I should do or not do. Give me your phone number, young man. My assistant will call you on FaceTime. I need to see who I’m talking to.”

Jason didn’t want to hang up. He knew if he did, the general would not only not call back but also refuse to take any further calls from him. This was the one chance he had to deliver his

message. “I want you to know, sir, I’ve written an article about an antidote for Male Madness called PAX. You might want to review it and comment on it, if you like, before it’s published in *the New York Times*. I’d be glad to email you a copy.”

“*The New York Times?*” The general shouted into the phone so loudly that Jason had to hold the instrument away from his ear. “PAX is a *top-secret weapon!*” the general screamed. “Where did you get this information? It’s a security breach and you *will* be arrested. I’m calling the FBI right now!”

The general’s words struck fear into Jason like an arrow to his heart. He was sure the general was about to hang up. “*Stop!*” he shouted into the phone. “I won’t reveal my sources, General, but let me tell you this: No one knows this weapon exists except you, me, and its developers. That’s the whole point, isn’t it? You don’t want the enemy to know this weapon exists before you deploy it. If they did, they’d take steps to avoid it.”

“You’ll be prosecuted for leaking government secrets if you inform—”

“There are many uses for PAX, General. Peacetime uses, for example, where naturally violent men need help. People have a right to know that you’ve refused even to test it.”

“For your sake, Jason, I hope you keep your mouth shut.”

“The article hasn’t been published, Sir. Not yet. But if you refuse to test it as a weapon, you can’t suppress it.”

“If you sent this... this article you’re speaking of, *the New York Times* won’t publish it. They know better than to publish an article about a top-secret weapon. And they certainly won’t publish an unsolicited article from a...how old did you say you were? Twelve?”

“I believe they will, sir.” Jason felt himself getting upset by this conversation, but he didn’t want to end the call until he’d said what he wanted to say. He wasn’t at all sure they would

publish the article because they still needed to speak with his source, Dr. Dietrich. He was therefore bluffing somewhat, but he continued. “If you would allow me, I’ll send it to you for review. After that, if I don’t hear from you right away, I’ll permit its publication.”

“Send me the damned article, Jason. I’ll have my assistant give you the email address.”

“I know your address, sir.”

“You do?” The general hung up, leaving Jason holding his phone to his ear with no sound coming from the opposite end. He held the instrument in his hand for a moment, then put it down on his desk. *This call didn’t go so well, he thought. I hope I didn’t screw it up. Whatever...*

He opened his computer and composed an email.

To: *General Waymore*

From: *Jason Brooks*

Subject: *U.S. ARMY REFUSES TO ACCEPT NEW CHEMICAL WEAPON CALLED PAX*

Message: *Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. As we discussed [Jason knew the word “discussed” was a stretch; there had been no discussion at all], I am attaching my news article about PAX.*

As you will see, the article opens with “For immediate release.” If you agree to test this weapon, I will withdraw it from publication. If you are not interested in PAX, as you say, you can look for its publication in the New York Times.

Jason Brooks

When he was done, he reviewed the email and pressed “Send.”

Chapter 17: Due Diligence

Luke thought deeply about what he would say to his dad, concerned about how he would react. Because his father, Eric Garner, was intensely focused when he was working, Luke usually kept his distance from him during the day. But now he had to tell him something important, and he urgently needed his help.

Luke knocked on the open door to his father's home office and peeked in. "Do you have a minute, Dad?" he asked tentatively. He saw his father engrossed in work on his office computer, examining the financials of companies and potential targets for investment by his hedge fund, Garner & Associates, LLC.

Mr. Garner swung around in his desk chair and actually smiled. "Sure, son. Come in."

He must be having a good day, Luke thought, so this could be a good time to catch him.

He stepped in to the half-darkened room and began. "I told you Jason's father quit his job, remember?"

"Yes, I know. He did the right thing, if you ask me. He really got screwed by his company...IBX, was it?"

"Yeah, Dad. That's the thing. My friends and I think IBX may be up to no good. They're about to make a move on a company called ChemT. We don't know exactly what, but let me show you something." Luke handed his dad one of the sheets of paper he held in his hand.

Mr. Garner took the sheet and squinted. "What am I looking at?"

"It's an email from both the president and vice president of IBX to a guy named Isaac at the Bank of New York."

Hi Isaac,

It's time to set the plan in motion. We'll have another meeting with Dietrich and tell him we're buying the whole company. We've got him in a corner now, and we'll press him to sell. He can't say no this time. We'll get his bank account information, and once he signs the contract of sale, you send the money for us and, a week later, claw it back as we planned.

Mr. Garner quickly scanned the message and asked, "Who's this guy Dietrich?"

"He's the president of ChemT. Looks like IBX is about to screw him too."

"And who's Isaac? Do you know what he does at the bank?"

"No, not yet. Karen O'Connor's working on it. But we figure he's their loan officer."

"I don't like this last sentence at all. Looks like they plan to buy this company, ChemT, for cash and steal the money back a week later."

"That's what has us concerned, Dad. Should we be doing something? Warn Mr. Dietrich? Or what?"

Mr. Garner remained seated and thought a moment before speaking. "I think I can help you smoke this out. How's Jason's dad doing, by the way? Did he find another job?"

"No. And if he'd stayed at IBX, I don't think we'd have a problem. He was looking into ChemT when they hired a new guy, Phil Ciaobano, as VP. When he quit, things changed."

"Is that right? Hmm. Getting back to the 'problem,' as you call it, suppose I send someone in there to talk to Dietrich. He could pretend we're making an investment. Usually, privately held companies like this one don't sell their stock to third parties, but Dietrich may be up against it. Maybe he'd welcome some financial assistance that doesn't come with strings attached. He could sell off a substantial stock interest and still keep control."

"We were thinking the same thing, Dad." Luke was happy, not only because his father was helpful, but also because they were working together.

“Consider it done. Let’s call him right now and see if he’s interested. We’ll go from there.”

Mr. Garner lifted his phone and called his Manhattan office to talk to his secretary, Yvonne. After catching up on his messages and the office chatter, he asked her to place a call to the president of ChemT.

* * * *

Luke cracked his knuckles as his father’s assistant, Yvonne, placed a call to Dietrich’s office from their main office. If she was successful in reaching him, the call would be transferred here.

Luke watched three minutes tick by on the wall clock, then jumped slightly when the phone finally rang.

“Hello, Dr. Dietrich.” His father put the call on speaker so Luke could hear. “My name’s Eric Garner, Dr. Dietrich. I’m CEO of an investment fund, Garner & Associates. I know time is precious, so I won’t take more than a moment. We’re looking to expand our portfolio into small enterprising companies and have been looking at ChemT. We very much like what we see and would like to send our representative over to speak with you. We need to perform our ‘due diligence,’ you understand, before we can make an investment.”

“As a matter of fact, I’ve only recently decided to sell a small portion of our stock. What was the name of your fund? I’ll need to become familiar with it before speaking to anybody about what we’re doing, and—”

“We’re Garner & Associates, based in New York City. We’re on the web, of course, and we’re registered with the federal and local agencies. I invite you to take a look. We’re solid financially, and we may be interested in adding your company to our portfolio.”

“Well...um, you’re welcome to come. But I’d be glad to send you a copy of our P&L and balance sheet.”

“That would be very helpful, Dr. Dietrich, but before investing, we always ask for a face-to-face meeting with the principals of the company. We’d like to know who we’re dealing with.”

“That would be fine with us. I can show your representative our manufacturing facility and talk about our plans for the future.”

“If you don’t mind then, I’d like to transfer this call back to Yvonne, my assistant, so she can schedule a visit.”

“Good idea. I’ll bring in my assistant, Mary, right now.”

Mr. Garner hung up the phone and turned to Luke. “That went well, don’t you think?” He was still smiling.

Luke had been waiting for some time to help his friend Jason. He now saw this as the perfect opportunity. “Cool, Dad,” he said bravely. “How about sending Jason’s dad, Mr. Brooks, to check out ChemT? He already knows a lot about the company.”

Chapter 18: The Final Meeting

Daniel Brooks was overjoyed when Jason told him what Luke's father was planning to do. Jason said Mr. Garner would ask him to review the financials of ChemT and then meet with its president, Dr. Klaus Dietrich. What Mr. Brooks liked most of all about this request was that he'd be busy again doing something in his field, which was finance.

Eric Garner called him, just as Jason said he would, to ask that he represent the Garner hedge fund. His task was to investigate the business prospects of ChemT.

"Anything special you want me to focus on?" he asked.

"We suspect IBX will try to buy ChemT and then default on payment," Eric said. We're not at all sure why IBX is interested in ChemT in the first place. It appears to be failing as a company. It's losing money."

"Yes, I saw that. I'm familiar with the financials. I studied them originally when I worked for IBX and reviewed them again from the sheets you sent me. ChemT is no longer viable. It no longer has positive cash flow. It will be insolvent and out of business within a couple of months unless something happens."

* * * *

It's a good time for everyone to meet and report their findings, Jason thought. He called Matt and Luke and told them to be at the hideout next Saturday morning. While on the phone, he asked Matt to bring his sister, Karen, and surprisingly, he agreed. Up until then, Matt had been resistant to including the two girls in their group, but he'd apparently had a change of heart. Karen and Amy had proved their worth, he'd told Jason, and, just like that, they became full-fledged members.

Without talking to his partners about it, Jason had asked Amy to join.

“Yes! I’m *in*,” she had shouted and pumped her fist.

Jason was not sure yet if Luke would go along with this, but to his surprise, he also agreed to admit the girls as partners in their enterprise.

Jason was the first to climb to the hilltop hideout on Saturday. He liked being the first to arrive since it gave him time to get his bearings and think through what he was going to say and do. It wasn’t long, though, before the others arrived, and he called the meeting to order.

“Let’s start with you, Matt,” Jason said. “Tell everybody here where Phil Ciaobano came from, and why Mr. Ackerman hired him as vice president.”

“Do you want the short version or the whole story?” Matt asked.

“The short version would be fine,” Jason replied.

“Okay. Bill Ackerman, the president of IBX, may have known about a kid called Phil Jenkinson when they both attended elementary school in the Bronx. Jenkinson had a troubled childhood, which Ackerman was probably aware of. Jenkinson changed his surname ‘Jenkinson’ to the Italian-sounding ‘Ciaobano’ to hide from his past when he turned twenty-one. Ackerman, if he knew of him then, probably lost touch with him because of that. He found Ciaobano again through his dealings with the Bank of New York and brought him into the company. Ackerman and Ciaobano are working together now to cheat Dr. Dietrich out of his ownership of ChemT.”

“What is the plan, exactly?” Jason asked.

“They plan to take a loan from the Bank of New York to buy the company and, after they get the title, claw back their payment.”

“They can do that? Claw back the payment?”

“They can, actually. Unless they pay by certified check. The Isaac guy they’re working with at the bank could enable them to cheat by not requiring certification.”

“Luke, thanks for getting your dad on board. Dad’s meeting with Dr. Klaus Dietrich is scheduled for next week, I think. He’s all excited to go. I’ll let everyone know what happens when it does.”

Jason turned next to his sister. “It’s your turn now, Amy. We’ll need to send a report to all the board members of IBX, telling them what we find out. Did you get their addresses?”

“Yes, sir!” Amy saluted her older brother. “I’m ready when you are, *sir*.” Amy emphasized the last word like an army sergeant.

“At ease, soldier,” Jason said, somewhat taken aback by Amy’s act. “When we have news from the front, we’ll be ready.” Looking over at Karen, he asked, “Karen, what about Isaac, the guy at the bank?”

“I got his last name. It’s Pearlman. He’s unmarried and lives alone in an apartment in Yonkers. He and Ciaobano both worked at the Bank of New York, granting loans to IBX when they needed money to buy companies. Ackerman recently became interested in buying ChemT, and he brought in Ciaobano to help with that. What I don’t know is why. What’s so special about ChemT, do you think?”

“Well, as we know now, ChemT’s been working on this new thing they call PAX,” Jason said. “I’ll ask my dad to find out more about it when he goes in there. After he meets with Dr. Dietrich, it will be time to contact the board members of IBX, letting them know what we found out.”

“Well, I guess that’s it then,” Luke concluded.

“All we have to do now is wait for Dad.” Jason stood up and was about to leave when he noticed everyone staring. “What?”

“What about you?” Matt asked pointedly. “You said you’d be contacting General Waymore.”

“Oh, that,” Jason replied. “It was a complete bust. He’s not at all interested in PAX.”

Chapter 19: PAX

Klaus Dietrich was beside himself with worry. First IBX and now a hedge fund were at his door, wanting to buy his stock in ChemT. Yes, they were offering to pay the money he desperately needed to keep his business alive. He'd "bet the farm" to develop his new product called PAX, and he'd lost. Now the company was no longer stable. It was his own fault. He was so angry he wanted to kick himself. There was nothing he could do at this point but go along and *hope*. Hope his company would survive and that he would keep control.

He looked at his watch. This man from a hedge fund, Daniel Brooks, would be arriving in just a few minutes. He grabbed his mouse and selected a Word file named "NDA." He typed, filling in the few blanks: today's date; the name Daniel Brooks; and the name of the company, Garner & Associates, LLC. He saved the document with a new title, "Garner NDA," and pressed "Print."

No sooner had he done this than Mary buzzed him. "Mr. Brooks is here," she announced over the intercom.

"Thanks, Mary. I'm ready."

Mary cracked open the door, then opened it fully, allowing Jason's dad to enter the office.

Daniel Brooks was dressed in a dark business suit with a light blue shirt and a regimental tie. "How do you do, Dr. Dietrich? I'm so pleased to meet you," he said, smiling broadly.

Dietrich hurried around from behind his desk, shook his hand, and welcomed him warmly.

"Please have a seat," he said, pointing to one of the two comfortable-looking chairs in front of his desk. "Before we begin," Dietrich continued, walking back around the desk and

taking his seat behind it, “I’ll need your signature on an NDA. I have a one-pager right here. Read it carefully before you sign it.” Dietrich slid the printed document across the desk surface for Brooks to read and sign.

Brooks nodded and began reading. After a few moments, he took a pen from his pocket and scribbled his signature. “Looks fine to me,” he said. “I like that you’re protecting your intellectual property. You can count on me to abide by this and keep it safe.”

“We have quite a few tungsten products we sell to the military, but they’re old technology now,” Dietrich began. “We have a new thing we call PAX, meaning *peace*. It’s an antidote for men’s desire to fight a hostile enemy. It makes them more willing to talk things out than to use aggressive force. We thought this would be the perfect weapon for the battlefield, but would you believe it? The U.S. military turned us down.”

“Have you tried it?” Brooks asked.

“Absolutely,” Dietrich replied. “We tried it on animals first and found that it really works. So, a number of men volunteered to take it, and we gave it to them—in small doses, at first. PAX worked for them too and they experienced no side effects. It works like caffeine. It wears off after two or three hours, but it can be readministered again and again. The plan was to drop it on the enemy before an attack.”

“Drop it? How do you mean?”

“It can come in either liquid or powder form, and there are several ways to do it. It can be released into the air. It can be secretly added to the water system, or to bottled water or a beverage like beer. Missiles with explosive warheads can lob it onto the battlefield. Or drones can carry it and drop it on the enemy.”

“And you say the military isn’t at all interested?”

“Yes, they turned us down flat. I can’t understand why, but here we are. We’ve spent millions to develop this new weapon, and the Army won’t even so much as test it.”

“I’ve reviewed your finances,” Brooks said. “And I can see ChemT is running out of money. The company won’t last much longer unless something’s done to turn it around.”

“I know, I know. The company needs to sell stock to survive this crunch.”

“That’s only a short-term solution. Your company needs to develop and sell new products.”

“I agree. But even if we start now, we’ll be out of business before we can design and develop something new.”

Before Brooks could answer, Dietrich was buzzed, and he picked up his desk phone.

“I have a Bill Ackerman and Phil Ciaobano here to see you,” Mary said, her voice wavering with concern. “Do you expect them?”

Dietrich’s eyes grew wide, and he looked at Brooks. “No, I don’t. But send them in,” he told her. “We have more visitors” was all he said to Brooks as he stood up.

Ackerman and Ciaobano walked in as Mary held open the door. Dietrich greeted them politely with “Good morning, gentlemen.”

They took a startled look at Brooks. “Brooks is here?” Ciaobano asked rhetorically, appearing annoyed. “We need to see you, Dietrich. *Alone.*”

“He stays,” Dietrich said firmly. “His company has also offered to buy some stock in ChemT.”

“We can’t allow that. We’ve decided to purchase *all* your stock.”

“*You* decided? Well, the company’s not for sale. Sorry.”

“You’re running out of money, Dietrich. You won’t survive another year.” Ciaobano was clearly angry now. It was as if Dietrich had previously promised to sell his company to IBX.

“We’ll survive,” Dietrich replied with an angry stare. “Especially with the help of Brooks here.” Dietrich nodded toward Brooks, who had remained seated throughout this brief exchange.

Brooks looked at Dietrich, then slowly stood up, seemingly trying to disappear from this awkward encounter. “Yes,” he said. “If we can be of financial assistance—”

“Don’t leave,” Dietrich ordered. “Before we go any further, Ciaobano, you and Ackerman have to sign the NDA. Brooks here has signed it. Now it’s your turn.” Dietrich pressed some keys on his desktop computer and brought up the form. He typed in the date, two names, and the company IBX into the various blanks before printing the document. Without further word, both Ciaobano and Ackerman scribbled their names at the bottom.

As they were signing, the silence was broken by the sound of a helicopter coming in from the far distance. The beat of the chopper’s wings grew increasingly louder until they became deafening as the aircraft settled onto the helipad right outside the office window. Once secure on the ground, the helicopter engine throttled back, and the racket quickly abated. During the moments it took for the aircraft to arrive, no one said anything.

“Who the hell’s that?” Ciaobano broke the silence.

“I...I’m not sure,” replied Dietrich, “but I think...” His thought was cut short when General Waymore stormed through the door.

“*Dietrich*,” he shouted. “Stop whatever damned thing you’re doing and listen up. We’re going to take your damned PAX and see what it can do. There’s just one condition. No one, *and I mean no one*, can know about this ‘weapon,’ if you want to call it that. It can only work if the

enemy's completely in the dark. Once they know about it, it's over. They can avoid it, and they will."

Chapter 20: Dinner at the Brookses

Jason was having a difficult time waiting for dinner. He desperately wanted to know what had happened at ChemT when his father drove down to Holmdel, New Jersey. His mother always insisted he wait for dinner, giving his dad a brief time to relax when he came home from work. “As I’ve told you many times,” she’d said, “the whole family would like to hear what he has to say.”

“Okay. Okay. I’ll wait. But what if there’s stuff I should know right away? I’ll need to talk to Matt and Luke.”

“If there’s anything your dad wants you to do, I’m sure he’ll let you know,” she’d told him. So Jason stayed in the kitchen and helped her make supper from the time he got home from school.

Promptly at six-thirty, after the places were set and platters of roast chicken and vegetables were placed on the dinner table, the Brooks family sat down to enjoy their evening meal and share the events of the day. Mrs. Brooks asked Jason to say the prayer this time, and he did so. “Dear God, we thank you for our *home* that shelters us, for our *clothes* that keep us warm, for our *food* that nourishes us. And please make us ever mindful of the needs of others. Amen.”

No sooner had Jason said “Amen” than Amy spoke up. Her voice filled with empathy and concern, she asked her father, “Did you get a new job yet, Daddy?”

“No. You know that wasn’t what my trip was for, Amy,” he explained. “Let me tell you what happened.”

“Okaayy.” She slurred the last syllable, as if to say, “I’d rather tell *my story* first.”

Mr. Brooks began, “I drove to ChemT in New Jersey today and met with the president, Dr. Dietrich. Right off the bat, he gave me a nondisclosure agreement to sign. I agreed to it, so I really can’t tell you anything he said about his new product, but we did have a good financial discussion about his company. We were halfway through our meeting when—surprise, surprise—both Bill Ackerman and Phil Ciaobano from my old company, IBX, showed up unannounced. And get this: They wanted to buy all the shares of ChemT. Dietrich had told them many times his company was not for sale. He had just succeeded in having them sign an NDA when, in an even bigger surprise, a U.S. Army general showed up. He came flying in on a helicopter and said the Army wanted ChemT’s new product. I’m sworn to secrecy about the product, but I can tell you, that if it works like Dietrich says it does, it’ll save the company. Dietrich won’t have to sell any stock, and the company’s going to take off like a rocket.”

Jason could barely believe what he’d just heard. *General Waymore wants PAX?* How did that happen? Dr. Dietrich had asked the general to test PAX and he’d told him he wasn’t interested. Like a magnet suddenly flipping its poles, this would have a huge ripple effect. He rose from his chair to call Matt and Luke.

“Sit down, Jason. I’m not finished,” Mr. Brooks said. “I was so shocked by the general’s appearance that I called Mr. Garner on the way home. It was a shock to him too, and he was super happy to learn what happened. He regretted only one thing: he said if I’d bought ChemT stock for his hedge fund before General Waymore showed up, he would have made a huge bundle. The value of the stock is going to go through the roof now. He assumed, of course, that I had something to do with the general’s change of heart, and he practically begged me to come work in his firm.”

“Whoopee!” Amy shrieked and practically jumped out of her seat.

“Not so fast, Amy. I didn’t accept. Not yet, anyway. I have to think this over. Also, Mr. Garner strongly suggested I contact the police about the fraud.”

“Fraud? What fraud?” Amy’s ears perked up at the mention of scandal.

“Remember that email to Isaac at the bank?” Jason asked her. “Where they said they would claw back the money they’d pay to buy ChemT?”

“But they never paid ChemT, so they haven’t clawed any money back, smarty pants. Pooh on you. Where’s the fraud?” Amy stuck out her tongue.

“I wondered that too,” Mr. Brooks said. “Turns out Garner’s been in touch with Matt’s dad, Officer O’Connor. When Matt showed him that email to Isaac Pearlman at the Bank of New York, he and his detective went to work. They contacted the bank. Turns out Ackerman and Ciaobano had been working together with Pearlman for years to cheat the bank’s loan customers. A little bit here, a little bit there. It was charged as interest on the bank’s mortgages, and it added up. They stole millions.”

The sound of a phone ringing interrupted the conversation. Mr. Brooks reached into his pants pocket and pulled out his smartphone. “Just a minute, please,” he said as he rose from his chair and headed for the kitchen. Mrs. Brooks started to object, but her husband waved her off as he put the phone to his ear.

A few minutes later, he returned to the table, stuffing the phone back in his pocket. “More news,” he said. “That was Paul Simon from the board of directors at IBX. He says Ackerman and Ciaobano have been arrested. The board wants me back at IBX. They offered me the position of CEO.”

This time, Amy did jump out of her seat. “OMG!” she shouted. “It worked! I sent an email to all the board members, attaching a copy of that email from Ackerman and Ciaobano. The board must have just voted to fire them.”

Jason and his parents joined in with her enthusiastic cheer.

“Why, that’s wonderful, dear,” Mrs. Brooks said.

Feeling elated by the news, Jason also congratulated his father. “*Good going, Dad!*”

“Just so you know,” Mr. Brooks said. “I accepted the job offer. I’m now the new president of IBX.”

Before anyone could comment, another phone rang. This time it was Jason’s. Jason looked at his mom, and she nodded, permitting him to answer it.

Jason stood up from the table and put his phone to his ear. His eyes widened as he listened, and his cheeks became warm. A minute later, Jason pulled his phone away from his ear and, looking at the screen, ended the call. “That was General Waymore,” he said. “He thanked me for that article I sent him. He said it clarified his thinking, so he changed his mind about PAX.”

Jason felt a rush of satisfaction. *You never know when you’ve reached someone, he thought. I’ve done a small part to help ChemT and maybe, just maybe, bring a small bit of peace to the world.*

“Now there’s one more thing to do,” he told his family and, still holding his cellphone, dialed a number. “I’m calling *The New York Times*,” he said and put the phone to his ear. After the call went through, he asked to speak with someone about an op-ed article he submitted. A moment later he gave his name and the title of his article to the person who answered. After listening a moment, he said, “Yes, that’s the article I sent. You say it will publish on Sunday?”

Thank you very much, ma'am. But no, you can't publish the article. Turns out what I wrote there is a military secret."

THE END