

There used to be a time when men stood back to back, took ten paces, turned and shot. Now you sit on your front porch and send your drone out two miles to do your shooting for you.

CROSSHAIRS: **Rogue Drones**

by Pferron Doss

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CROSSHAIRS ROGUE DRONES



PFERRON DOSS

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CHAPTER 1: A Familiar Sound

As the mid-afternoon sun rose high in the sky, dozens of various urbanites relaxed in Vilas Park. Dogs ran recklessly across the green grass, chasing Frisbees while barking excitedly. Kids played on structures, continually shedding clothes, shouting and laughing in the hot summer sun while their parents watched over them. The soccer fields hosted made-up games involving assorted balls and rules, with fist-sized rocks lined up to denote official lines. Honored citizens played chess at their usual tables, half-heartedly arguing politics and lamenting the shortcomings of the younger generation. Across a small ravine, at two dilapidated tables underneath the shadows of the trees, a small group of young men lounged insolently, surveying their self-appointed turf. A smaller group of teenaged girls stood off to the side, talking quietly among themselves.

Out in the sunlight, a teenaged African-American male assembled a remote-controlled helicopter, checked his controller, and looked around. Miles Watson was seventeen years old, a senior at the local high school, and one of those kids who never fit neatly into the usual cliques at school. He was athletic, but not really interested in sports, and he was smart enough to do well at his studies if he chose to try, which he sometimes did not. He was good-looking, with short black hair, clear skin, easy smile, and clever eyes. Even dressed in faded jeans and a plain blue tee-shirt, he appeared to come from a good family. Assured that he had space to fly his 'copter, he started it up and launched it skyward.

Several onlookers turned simultaneously to the new sound. The small engine wasn't quiet, but it didn't shriek or pierce the air; it had a pleasing hum. As he performed cutting-edge aerobatics that only the very experienced could do, he soon was lost in an aerial trance. His face grew expressionless as he put the tiny craft through a series of moves, arcing and zooming through the summer sky. He was oblivious to the world around him; his focus went completely to his controller. When a swarm of gnats discovered his slightly sweaty face, he was brought back to reality, and he set the 'copter to hover while he brushed the bothersome bugs away.

His gaze followed the path of his helicopter as he banked in a wide loop, and out of the corner of his eyes, he saw the teens at the table in the shade. His body tightened, and his facial expression turned from clear joy to disdain. They seemed to be mocking him, making exaggerated robot motions with their hands on invisible controllers much like his. He glared back at the group, especially the one individual with daring baggy pants in great danger of falling off. A husky, muscled twenty-three-year-old African-American male was wearing dark shades, sported gaudy jewelry hanging off his neck over a bright white party shirt, and he was intricately tattooed on his neck and arms.

"Crap, it's Adam Jacobs," Miles said under his breath. He never called the young tough "AJ" because he knew it bothered him. Miles tried to return to his flight practice, but he was losing his concentration. The girls behind Adam were quite cute, he decided, variously sporting hair in cornrows or tight bobs, and all three wearing their blouses half-buttoned, with plenty to look at. They wore cutoff shorts, and their long legs were strong and athletic. He frowned, wondering how someone like Adam always managed to surround himself with the pretty ones. He shrugged, reminding himself that these were the same girls that always laughed and teased him as he rode his bicycle. Now, his only recourse was to put on a flying exhibition that would leave everyone speechless.

"Hey, AJ look at that! He's hell o good," one of the young males in the crew insisted. They all looked up, including AJ, who was

attempting to talk business with his homies. AJ quickly became perturbed.

"Nah, anyone can fly them helicopters. His moves are pretty weak," AJ insisted with authority.

"I dun-no AJ, looks pretty hard to me," the teenager said slowly, staring as the helicopter continued to do aerials.

With that, AJ got up. "Shut the hell up! You don't know what you're talking about," he snapped with a loud voice while rising up to his full height. As he glared at each and every one around him, he saw that he regained their entire attention.

"So, what are those moves that dude is doing now? Looks pretty impressive to me," another broke in weakly, while taking a quick look over his shoulder.

Looking skyward and just shaking his head, AJ paused. "It's called a funnel, and I bet he'll attempt to roll out of it and fly into a pie dish."

A chuckle rang out from the group. "Pie dish? I'm hungry. Pass me some chips over here." This brought a deep scowl from AJ, who continued to glance up at the flying exhibition.

"Like I was saying. Watch this. He's flying his helicopter sideways in a circle nose, pointing it straight to the ground in a big olé' loop," he continued, while impressing his boys.

"I didn't know you could fly AJ," a follower shouted out with half-eaten chips hanging on his lips.

Motioning for one of the females to get him a beer, AJ waited until it was opened and handed to him. Alcohol was banned from the park, but AJ was never one to let rules interfere with his plans. "There's a lot you don't know about me," he grunted, licking his lips after a huge gulp.

"So, what's he doing now?" asked the tallest girl.

"He's setting up to go vertical for a tail spin," AJ said. "I bet he'll take it as high as he can, with the nose still pointing up and the fuselage almost parallel to the ground." He tried to sound bored. "Then..."

"Whoa, break it down, big guy," said one of the boys. "Us homies don't know the lingo."

AJ pounded his fist on the rickety picnic table and made it shudder. "Shut up and watch! It's falling out of the sky tail first. If he's half the pilot he thinks he is, he'll let it fall and not pull it out until it almost slams into the ground." A few seconds later the helicopter did exactly as he predicted.

Now the team was more impressed with AJ than with Miles. "You nailed it for sure," the tall girl said with astonishment. "Not bad, not bad."

Miles brought the helicopter back to his feet and cut the power; the blades whirred slowly to stop. Without fanfare, he next launched his airplane, a tiny blue fixed-wing model that resembled a common Cessna. It roared to life with a louder, more powerful whine, and immediately gained altitude and speed. Miles let it circle above him to ensure it was running properly without needing adjustments.

"AJ, AJ, there he goes again. Looks like a plane," the tall girl said. She pointed to the sky while pulling her braids out of the way.

"I can see and hear it. He's only doing basic rolls close to the ground," AJ said, taking another long swig from his beer and tossing aside the can. "Hope he crashes it. Someone hand me another beer!" he commanded.

By this time the plane was high in the sky and climbing to the point of stalling, then smoothly leveled out. Miles again glanced back over to the group and took both hands off the transmitter. The plane continued to fly away, with the noise noticeably fainter. When the sound was barely audible, he placed both hands back on the transmitter pushed a couple buttons. The plane adjusted course instantly and soon reappeared, to the amazement of the group.

"Wow, that's pretty cool. No hands driving, I meant flying," the jokester in AJ's posse marveled.

"That's nothing," AJ said, waving his hand. "All he did was push a button on the transmitter called a 'return to home' function. Hell, anyone can do that, even you, stupid!" he said, punching the

jokester on the shoulder to add emphasis. The disciple rubbed his shoulder thoughtfully and moved a few steps away.

CHAPTER 2: A Confrontation

The modest two-floor family home where Miles lived was close to the park. It was recently painted a pleasant light blue, and the bushes were trimmed with care. There were cracks in the sidewalk, and the summer heat had turned the lawn brown, but the house still looked comfortable. Three middle school boys were riding their BMX bikes in the street in front of the house when one pulled up and cocked his ear to the sky.

The noise from Miles' aircraft props caught the ears of Kenny, his younger brother. Kenny smiled broadly. A full head shorter than Miles, wearing a collection of summer-wear that was partially handed down, Kenny was dressed in short pants, a ragged Nike t-shirt, and Converse high-tops that had seen better days. His hair was also trimmed close like his older brother, and he also had the same handsome smile. Kenny had just begun to fill out, with muscle mass beginning show on his stocky frame. Over the summer he had grown three inches, complaining of late night cramps in his legs and a changing voice that sometimes cracked when he least expected it.

"Hey, Kenny, you hear that? Someone's flying across the park," said his friend Dontrelle, a small boy straddling a nice, chromed five-speed that perfectly fit him. The third boy, named Bo, pulled up on a much older bike that seemed to be held together with black and silver tape. Bo was even smaller, and followed Kenny's every move. He remained quiet, awaiting instructions.

"Yeah, I've been listening and I bet it's my bro," Kenny said proudly. He looked back over his shoulder and spotted the plane

doing a roll. "Yep, that's my bro's RC!" he said, pointing, as it disappeared behind some trees.

Dontrelle nodded and then looked around. "Let's head over to the bike park and do some flying of our own, BMX-style," he said excitedly. "I got some moves to practice." He made his bike seem like a snorting horse, raring to head out, rocking back and forth expectantly.

Kenny had a far-away look in his eyes. He wanted to keep riding, but he was always interested in what his brother was doing. He looked in the direction the plane was following and saw it disappear into the sun's rays, then quickly fly back into focus. "Naw you guys go ahead, I'll catch ya later. I'm gonna go see what Miles is up to." He turned his bike around and pedaled furiously toward the far end of the park, while the other two boys rolled smoothly to the concrete ramps of the bike park.

Kenny put his head down and pumped hard, paying little attention to his path. When he looked up he saw he had interrupted a soccer game, and the boys immediately yelled at him to get off the field. This only ensured his increased speed, and as he darted around some hedges he could recognize the familiar silhouette of his brother.

"Miles!" he yelled, while looking up at the descending plane. Kenny made a bee-line for his older brother, taking a direct line that brought him straight through AJ and his homies. Yelling, they parted hurriedly, and one of them threw a beer can at him, which fell short. Coming to a sliding, grinning halt, Kenny sent a shower of dirt and rocks flying, drawing a scowl from his brother.

"What the hey!" Miles growled. "You trying to start something? Them aren't the dudes to mess around with, and you know that," Miles reminded him. Avoiding eye contact with the aggrieved party, Kenny and Miles stood in silence, looking up at the flying exhibition as the aerobatics continued.

Disregarding the admonishment, Kenny smiled. "Hey bro, you said the next time I saw you flying you'd let me fly, so here I am," he boldly stated.

Trying to ignore his little brother, Miles pumped more power to the plane, and it revved harder. As it abruptly turned around toward them, he inverted the wings, doing multiple rolls. He knew he wasn't going to be left alone until he let Kenny fly, so he shrugged his shoulders. "Look, if I let you fly, you promise to pay attention to what you're doing? This is my favorite plane and I don't want it smashed because you weren't paying attention. You understand?"

Unfazed, Kenny nodded and muttered "Yeah, yeah, I know," as he impatiently moved closer, while reaching out for the transmitter. They exchanged the controller, and soon both sets of eyes were critically following the plane as Kenny took it through some basic turns and a couple shaky rolls.

Miles was not happy. "Steady now, give it more power," he cautioned. "Ok, turn it around, it's getting away from you," he commanded sharply. The plane's hum was getting less distinct.

"I got it, let me alone. I got it," Kenny assured him confidently. The plane reappeared from the sun's glare.

For the next few moments the buzzing of the prop swelled in the summer sky. The two brothers elbowed each other and laughed easily, sharing their bond. Soon, Dontrelle and Bo appeared, stopping close by and straddling their bikes.

"Hey Kenny, good flying dude," Dontrelle called out. This caused a quick look around from Kenny, just long enough for him to lose contact with the plane. It was obvious he had become cocky and Miles sensed it as well.

The plane began to lose altitude and Miles attempted to grab the transmitter but missed. Kenny pulled away and regained control to avert a crash. The plane was too low to effectively turn around, but inexperienced as he was, Kenny attempted it anyway. Barely missing some trees, he made the turn, but as it was coming back it buzzed AJ and his onlookers, causing them to duck. This scared Kenny. He panicked and flew it into the ground between AJ and himself. Dust rose from the crash site and the air grew quiet and tense.

Flustered, Miles snatched the transmitter from Kenny and pointed to the plane. "Get over there quick and pick it up before they get it. I'll gather up the other stuff, now hurry."

But it was too late. The plane had already been picked up by the thug with the large bleach spot in his hair. He held the plane high in the air like a trophy, far above Kenny's reach. Everyone in AJ's crew was laughing at the scene. "Now don't let your little ass get whooped today, back off" he taunted, while looking around and laughing at the despair in Kenny's face.

Kenny attempted to jump but was knocked to the ground in defeat. "Best you crawl on away from here before I have to show you what we do with little assholes like you," the young tough mocked.

Kenny looked back at Miles then jumped again but was intercepted in midair and forced back to the ground with the wind almost knocked out of him. Feeling embarrassed, hurt and alone out of the corner of his eye he saw a fist-sized jagged rock right under his forearm. With contempt he reached for it, jumped up and with a mighty, well-aimed throw that brought back all of his years as a Little League pitcher, he let fly. The rock smacked his tormenter square across the side of the face, almost knocking him to the ground. Staggering, he immediately dropped the plane and reached for his bloody face.

When the boy saw blood on his fingers, he was enraged. "You little..." he blurted, but before he could attack Kenny, he was restrained by two of his cohorts. Some of his attempt to wrestle away was for show, but he really did seem to want a piece of Kenny. The two held him firm, and he settled down.

Miles reached the rowdy group and saw the bloody and swollen cheekbone of the attended target. He felt despair; this was not good. His brother was standing near him, chest heaving as he gulped air. His small fists were clenched, and he seethed with rage.

"Come on Kenny, let's get on home," Miles said gently, touching his brother's arm.

But this time someone else stood in the way impeding any effort to pick up the plane. "Boy, do you know who we are?" one of the agitators hollered.

"Yeah, I know who you are. You're the BBB's" Miles announced as he placed Kenny behind him. The group had started to encircle them. Staring directly at AJ and without pause, Miles continued. "You're Adam Jacobs, and you're the so-called leader. Please tell your homie to give me my plane back."

In unison, everyone gasped at this boldness. AJ was offended, and his eyes narrowed. "His name is Kondray. I'm AJ, and nobody calls me Adam unless they want to get jacked up by my boys and me."

Not to be deterred, Miles looked at the group in disdain. "Yeah, yeah, whatever. Just get out of the way so I can get my plane and leave you alone," he insisted.

"You don't understand. You hurt my boy, rather that little ass did. There's a price you have to pay. Because no one messes with one of my boys without repercussions."

"Pay for what? He shouldn't have snatched the plane in the first place. It didn't hit any of your so-called boys," seethed Miles. He turned and pushed the bleeding agitator backwards, which caused him to step on the plane. Immediately everyone laughed aloud. "Oops," Kondray said insolently, as he shrugged his shoulders.

"Looks like the fuselage is broke," AJ said in mock sorrow.

Miles made a fist, then relaxed slightly. "Come on Kenny, let's get home. We don't need that plane anyway."

AJ didn't like that move at all. "Hold it! What good is that plane to me? It's busted. So, what's that thing in your hands?" he asked with sarcasm.

"You know what it is. It's a transmitter," Miles spit out. "I've seen you flying before, and you aren't gonna get it either. I heard you used to be a good pilot and used to teach kids to fly until..." he trailed off, while putting his arm around Kenny and squinting against the sun's setting rays.

"Until what?" AJ demanded. Getting no response, his eyes glared as he motioned to his boys. "Get it," he commanded.

With silent menace, the group tightened its circle. Kondray reached into his back pocket, pulled out a knife and with eyes full of rage, he thrust it towards Miles but he missed his attended target.

Kenny cried out, as did Miles. Kenny staggered and his body went limp. His eyes stared out at his brother, begging for help as he fell backwards striking his head on a partially buried boulder. Moaning softly, Kenny lay motionless on the ground as blood seeped from his shirt.

"Damn, AJ, I didn't mean to stick the boy," Kondray stammered while staring at the blood-stained switchblade "I was only doing what you told us to do. That little shit stepped in front of me," he uttered defensively.

AJ composed himself while shaking his head. "I told you. I told you you'd have to pay. I told you to come work for me a million times. Now look what you made me do," he said mockingly, shaking his head. Looking first at his boys, then scanning his immediate surroundings, he turned his gaze back at Miles. The two boys glared at each other. AJ broke the spell and shrugged, looking over at Kondray and smiling.

"Come on boys, let's scoot," AJ said. "I'll deal with you later, dawg," he said with authority. They all scattered, leaving beer cans, food wrappers, and other litter behind. Kondray staggered away, holding his face, pleading with AJ for medical attention.

Miles held his brother's head in his lap as his eyes began to close then up at the fleeing gang. With contempt, he struggled to holler out an oath, but only a whisper came out of his mouth. "I'll get you for this AJ, if it takes the rest of my life," he vowed.

Hearing the commotion, a young mother came running with child in tow. She looked down, quickly gave her child to her husband, and immediately knelt down beside Kenny. She reached into her purse, pulling out a diaper. "My name is Mandy and I'm a nurse," she told Miles, as he gave way to her authority. "Here, move away and keep the boy's head off the ground," she told Miles.

"Hurry up. He's not going to bite you," she commanded. She pulled Kenny's shirt up and placed the diaper over the oozing wound. "Someone call 911 and tell them we need an ambulance here in the park," she commanded, but another onlooker was already pecking at his phone. He turned away and started blurting out their situation.

Looking into Kenny's half-opened eyes, she smiled. "It's ok boy, you're gonna be ok, now you keep your eyes on me," she continued. "Lucky it wasn't a gunshot," she assured him.

The distant sounds of sirens pierced the air and approached the park. They soon arrived on the scene, driving right up across the hard earth of the field to where everyone had gathered. Mandy informed the ambulance drivers what she had done and who she was. Soon the police arrived, their lights punctuating the darkening skies.

"Make way, make way," an officer ordered as the ambulance drivers rolled a gurney closer to Kenny, who was sprawled and motionless on the ground. The EMTs smoothly swooped in like angels of mercy, bracing and locking the gurney expertly.

"Lots of blood, Officer Stew," one of them said to the policeman.

Placing her hand on Miles' shoulder, Mandy softly assured him. "It's ok boy, move out of the way and let them do their work. Move now, so they can load him up and get him to Valley Central Hospital." Miles didn't say a word as he did what he was told.

The police officer opened up his notepad and clicked a pen. Known as "Officer Stew," his nameplate said "Stewart" on his uniform. He was an older white cop, a little too heavy around the middle, with a sad, seasoned look in his eyes. He looked around, asking if anyone had seen what happened.

An old man leaning against his cane motioned a spectator to get out of his way as he pushed and limped his way forward. It was the old man known simply as "Pops," and he had an authority to him. He was dressed neatly, sporting a bow tie, and his white hair set off a dark, wrinkled face. "I saw what happened, officer. Sure enough, damn hoodlums are always in this park making trouble. Used to be

a nice place for families and kids but not anymore, with this stuff happening all the time."

Glancing down at the boy as they placed him on a stretcher, Pops frowned and continued. "Somebody yelled 'AJ' is what I heard, but I don't know who stabbed the boy. Somebody in that damned gang sure enough did it. Call themselves the Bunker Buster Boys, BBB. Yep, that's who done it. Always driving them jacked up cars, playing music you can hear a mile away," he snorted.

The officer looked up from what he was writing and looked at the ambulance, which was now slowly leaving the park, siren blasting the night. "Anybody see which way they went?" the cop asked.

The old man tamped his cane on the ground, then lifted it and attempted to point in the correct direction, but almost stumbled. Regaining his balance, he pointed the way. "It's not right," he complained loudly. "You all need to patrol this park more and keep them good for nothing gangs away from here," he bellowed. "They scurried off like slinking dogs, he said, continuing to point in the direction of flight. "Yeah, everyone knows this here park belongs to AJ and triple BBB's, that's for sure. Ain't nothing bad happens here without them being in the middle of it."

The cop shrugged and turned to Miles. "Where do you live, boy? Gather up your stuff and I'll take you home. There's nothing else you can do here. He'll be in good hands, so come on now let's get you and all your things together." Reluctantly, Miles slowly carried the bike over to the police car, and pushed it into the trunk. He returned to the broken plane and picked it up, noting the damage and wondered which would be easier to repair – the plane or his brother.

CHAPTER 3: A Long Way Home

It was both the longest and shortest car ride Miles had ever taken. As he prepared himself for how he was going to tell his parents what had happened, he went over the situation over and over in his mind. He saw every detail in slow-motion, and it was agonizing to realize he couldn't stop the memories flooding over. That part seemed to take forever. At the same time, it was a very short drive, and took no time to get home. Pulling up in front of the house, the officer told Miles to slow down as he'd walked him up to the house. "Take a breath, son," he said calmly.

But Miles was practically running. Once at the door, Miles burst in, yelling. "Mama, Mama! Come quick, Mama!" he blurted out.

Bernestine Watson turned the corner and saw the officer standing in the doorway. He noted her professional clothes, expensive haircut, and intelligent eyes, guessing she was an office worker about forty years old. She paused, scanned the room, then grew agitated. "Where's Kenny? Where's Kenny?" she called out sharply. "Oh God, my boy! What's happened to Kenny?" she blurted out, as tears swelled up in her eyes.

"Mrs. Watson, I'm Officer Stewart. There's been an accident in the park. Your son has been taken to Valley Central Hospital. I can take you and your son to the hospital if you like," he gestured with concern on his face.

"Does my husband Omar know what happened?" she asked, while grabbing her purse and sweater.

"Yes, he's already being dispatched to the hospital, so we had better go now" officer Stewart said as he backed out of the house

while holding the door open for Bernestine and her son. They jumped in the car and quickly sped away, lights flashing but siren muted.

Arriving at Valley Central, Officer Stewart ushered them through the hallways and shook hands with Omar, who thanked him for bringing his wife and son to the hospital. About six feet tall, with freshly cut hair slightly tinged with gray, Omar was a commanding figure. He was older than his wife by several years, and his face showed more age and tension than it probably should. After a deep embrace of his wife, Omar stared at Miles, leaving many things for later.

"They just took Kenny into surgery a few minutes ago, and I haven't heard anything," Omar said. Shifting his attention now to Miles he immediately started to frown. "What the hell happened?" he asked. "Why didn't you watch after your little brother?" But before Miles could say one word, his father continued with his rant. "I told you not to go down to that park anymore. That damn park hasn't been safe since them gangs done started taking over that place. It isn't safe for anyone to be there and we just don't have enough officers to patrol that park every minute of the damn day," he added, feeling somewhat guilty himself. "That's it! From here on out that park is off limits! You and your brother are no longer allowed to go to that park, you understand? Unless me or your mother are with you, I don't want you there!" said angrily.

Miles attempted to tell his dad what happened, but the emergency room door opened and in walked two, male doctors in their clean white lab coats. "My name is Dr. Jackson," said the older man, probably in his late forties, rubbing his chiseled face then his well-manicured beard while looking down at his clip board. "And this is Dr. Pope," he said politely, pointing to a wide eyed attentive intern with tightly braided cornrows and stylish glasses. They exchanged handshakes and pleasantries, and he grew serious. "Your son was brought in unconscious and we performed emergency surgery. Apparently, he was stabbed in the abdomen lacerating the liver and the trajectory was such it nicked the

spleen" he said pointing to his side in an illustration. In addition, his head struck a rock and caused additional bleeding. We gave him a transfusion and got him stapled up. He was naturally in a lot of pain when he was brought in, so we gave him something for that. We performed a scan to ensure we didn't miss anything, and that was negative. I believe he will be ok after a few days. He's being taken up to recovery, and then to a room. You'll be notified what room he will be in at that time. Do you have any questions of me?" the doctor inquired.

"He'll be ok?" Omar said doubtfully.

Dr. Jackson nodded. "He's young and strong. It was a jagged wound, and there are no complications other than that spleen. We got that mended easily."

Miles hugged his Mom and she kissed him tenderly on the cheek, but said nothing.

"Ok then, why don't you all just have a seat in the waiting area? It'll be an hour or so before you can see your son." With that, both doctors went back into the emergency room, leaving the Watsons to talk.

Omar chose seats across the room from where everyone else had been sitting, as he didn't want their conversation to be interrupted by others seeking solace. With an unconcerned feeling towards Miles, he dug right in. "How many times have I told you to stop wearing that hoody? Pull up your pants and act like a decent kid! You can't even walk, your pants are so low, and you're gonna trip because you don't tie up those laces," he barked, baiting Miles for what was coming next. "Now tell me what happened and don't leave anything out," he demanded.

For the next thirty minutes Miles retold the story and started to cry when he informed his dad that Kenny wasn't the intended target. "He had stepped in between me and them guys. That knife was meant for me. I should have been the one stabbed, not him," he said with a heavy heart, while tears rolled down his face.

As Bernestine moved closer to Miles to comfort him, Omar became even more outspoken. "Don't you dare baby him! Had he

listened to me in the first place, this would have never happened! I told him to stay away from that park and to stop flying those airplanes and helicopters. So that's it! No more, and that's it!" Omar yelled, which turned everyone's attention toward him. At that point, Bernestine just shook her head at her husband.

Miles didn't want to hear that prohibition, as flying was his favorite escape from the living conditions in the crowded city and all the other teenaged angst in his life. Not having any place to go or hang out was bad enough. Flying was his only antidote from his loneliness. He had few friends, as many of the kids he grew up with had moved away when their parents relocated deeper into the suburbs after getting better jobs. Now everything was ruined. Nothing to do, and nowhere to go. He felt trapped.

Miles stood up and yelled back, "You want to change the neighborhood? Then you work in the park! That's where the gangs hang out. We have no place to go. You're never around. You're always at work, so you don't know anything that's going on and you don't care!" He turned to leave.

"You listen here!" Omar yelled, but it was in vain. Miles ran out of the waiting room, but once outside he remembered he needed a ride home. He decided to walk and brood, cursing his father, AJ, and anyone else he could think of. As he walked the five miles of city streets, he felt dejected and alone. Maybe everything really was his fault. Or maybe it was all the gangs, he decided. He was surrounded by them, and they seemed to be above the law.

Using some simple metrics, he measured each person he saw and labeled them.

If you wore your pants low, you were a gang banger.

If you wore a hoody, you were a gang banger.

If you wore your baseball hat backwards, you were a gang banger.

If you drove a car with others beside you, and it slowed down, you all were gang bangers.

Hatred gripped him, and the only thing that mattered to him was getting even with the BBB's. He thought about Kenny pestering

him about wanting to go to the park and fly the plane, and he thought maybe he shouldn't have taken him up on it. Kenny and he were very close, and he had promised Kenny for a couple of weeks that he'd get a turn. Once he made the promise, he couldn't go back on it. Brothers don't do that, he thought. But he felt now that maybe he should have delayed it more. No, he decided, shaking his head. He realized that Kenny really was doing ok as a pilot, and he felt proud of his little brother for developing his skill.

Omar seeing the sliding doors close calmed down a bit. He tended to see things in black or white, with few gray areas in between. He looked at Bernestine, who had a much more nuanced look on life. He loved that about her, even when it annoyed him. Now he just needed to hear her thoughts; she had always had better answers to complex problems.

Bernestine standing over Kenny who was still unconscious held his hand while tears dripped from her cheek and on to his sheets. Just shook her head while looking deeply into Omar's eyes as she began to hum to calm her nerves.

"What are we to do?" he asked her softly. "I chose this neighborhood because it had a good community policing program. It was a little wild, but every neighborhood has its knuckleheads. Every neighborhood has its issues, but damn, what are we to do? Maybe we should just pack up and move further out to the suburbs like everyone else! Leave this damn place to the junkies, the drug lords, and the hookers, and let all those lazy asses just living off the state take over. I'm up to my eyes in all this crap," he seethed, with venom in his voice.

Bernestine soothed him with a gentle touch to his cheek. "Now you listen here, honey. No one's going to chase us away from our lovely home. We built something here, and we're not going to run away. You know that we got more than lazy folks living on welfare. There's more here than drug addicts and pimps. There are many young black professionals just like us, living here and doing fine. I'm proud of this place we call home. You just calm down. Everything's going to be ok," she said calmly.

Omar slumped and stared at the floor then out the window as rain splattered against the pane. "I know, honey, I know. I'm just frustrated, and seems like I can't do anything to make it right."

"Let's talk about this tonight after things settle down a bit," she continued, embracing Omar tightly. They brooded in silence, alone with their thoughts but together in spirit, as the minutes ticked by.

A young nurse came into the room gingerly rubbed Kenny's head, smiled then took his vitals. "He'll be fine" she said with a sympathetic voice as she turned and left.

Bernestine noticed that Kenny had a bit of a smile on his face, and she wondered what put that there. She didn't know that in his dreams, Kenny was still flying the airplane over the park, buzzing the tree tops and spinning into the sky.

After a bit, they talked one more time with the nurse and went home. They had no doubt that Miles would walk home. He had always used such treks for time to himself, and the local police knew he was Omar's kid, and they'd leave him alone. They took a route that they figured Miles might take, but they didn't see him.

Getting home from the hospital for the second time in one day, Bernestine slowed down as she and Omar approached the front porch. "Let's sit awhile before we go in," she said softly. She sat on the concrete porch, while Omar sat on the steps. "You remember when we used to come out here for coffee, chat with the neighbors and watch the kids grow up?" she asked. She had warm memories of those days, getting to know the neighbors and learning how things worked here. She nodded to herself at the memories.

"So much has changed. Even the place next door is different. It had all those hippy artisans, creating such wonderful things. We'd go to the Saturday market where we could get all our vegetables in the summer, and we even had the Goldsteins with their mom and pop store. They're all gone, and so many places been vacant now for years now. I wonder what they're going to do with this place if we move." She let the thought trail off.

Omar sighed heavily. "Don't know honey, but I do know realtors keep pestering us about selling. I bet as soon as we'd sell it, they'd tear everything down and build condos or something."

"Well, they can just wait. I'm in no hurry to move and make Kenny have to start at a new school. Miles, he's almost done and will be graduating in June. He'll be getting out of here on his own."

Omar wondered where this was going. It was probably going to come back to his ultimatum that he was already regretting.

"That boy better not be out late," he said irritably.

She looked at him. "He's just gathering his thoughts. He'll get home all right."

"He better," Omar said.

Bernestine continued. "I'm so proud of Miles," she sighed, looking deep into Omar's eyes and seeking confirmation.

Omar nodded. "He's a good kid. I know he and Kenny are just step-sons, and they don't have my name, but I love them just the same. I may not show it, but I do. I don't exactly know how Miles screwed up with his brother today, but it could have been worse."

Bernestine nodded. "It could have been a lot worse. I see it every day, gunshot wounds and drug ODs. They're kids out there suffering, and ours are finding their way. You've been a good father to them, and they know it. We'll see what Miles does when he graduates. Hopefully, he'll find something that will interest him and he can make some money. He's thinking he'll be a pilot, but he'll have to go to college for that."

Omar shook his head. "We got two salaries and we haven't had much luck saving up for college for those boys," he said wistfully. "If I could get a couple promotions at work, that would sure help," he said while standing up and stretching.

Bernestine stood up, too. "Miles brought home an application we need to talk about. It's called the High School to Flight School Program, but maybe tonight isn't the time to talk about it. We all had a long and trying day. Tomorrow will be better," she said hopefully. She gave Omar a long, affectionate hug as they both went inside.

Arriving at the hospital the next morning Bernestine and Omar walked cheerfully expecting to see Kenny sitting up in his bed watching television. Instead as they both pushed the curtain out of their way they stopped in horror. "What?" but before they could say another word.

"Mr. and Mrs. Watson, I presume? I'm doctor Snelling. You mind stepping out in the hallway, I'd like to talk to you" he requested as he pushed the curtain out of their way. "Don't be alarmed with all the tubes they're preventative."

Omar standing defensively just glared at the doctor. "What's wrong with my son?" he demanded.

"Early this morning it was reported during the shift that your son woke up and complained of being hot. His temperature had climbed to 102 and he began shaking. His wound was swelling so I was called in while we gave him antibiotics. I see no reason to be alarmed but we'll keep an eye on him" he said attempting to reassure them. "

Omar's cell phone went off so he excused himself while Bernestine walked quietly back into the room. Sitting down next to Kenny and lovingly running her fingers through his hair she began to cry. "I know you can hear me son. It's mama, I'm hear. I know you'll be ok" she said staring deeply at the monitors. She reflected on one of the last gestures she remembered when she was yelling at Kenny for not completing his chores. So irrelevant she thought as Omar's hand was felt on her shoulder brought her out of her private thoughts.

Bernestine attempted to get Miles to accompany her and Omar to see Kenny, but he always declined saying he couldn't see him that way. Little did they know Miles rode his bicycle to the hospital practically every day while they were at work. He sat at the side of the bed and cringed at the beeps and sounds of the medical equipment. This particular day he didn't even notice the nurse who had come in to check Kenny's vitals during her rounds and it startled him.

"Hi, I'm Tasha, his nurse. Would you please move over to the other side until I'm done here? I've seen you hear almost every day. He must be very special to you."

"Yeah, he's my younger brother and it's all my fault he's here. It should have been me and not him" he said in a soft voice. "Aw, why isn't he moving and what is all this stuff anyway?" he continued somberly.

"We're monitoring his breathing, giving him fluids so he doesn't get dehydrated, some nourishment and medicines to help with any infections."

"But why is he asleep every time I come here?"

"We've sedated him so he'll remain still. We don't want him moving around until his wounds are all healed" she said while typing her notes in the bedside computer.

"Can he hear me?"

"I don't know but it's ok to talk to him. Sometimes it helps" she said with genuine smile as she turned and left.

As the curtain closed Miles looked down at Kenny as his lips quivered. "I'm sorry lit'l bro for what they've done to you. If I could take it all back I wouldn't have let you fly knowing AJ and his dawgs were in the park. They're always causing trouble. But believe me lit'l bro, they're gonna get what's coming to them. That I promise!" he continued with anger and a revengeful tone as his eyes glossed over.

CHAPTER 4: Off the Roof

A few weeks later, Miles while riding his bicycle through the neighborhood when he came upon some kids that were talking about what they had just seen. He pulled up in front of a thin young man dressed in baggy shorts and a worn hoodie, sporting an earring and bushy Afro. "What up, Ralphie? What ya doing?" Miles asked.

"Oh, nothing, you know. Hangin'. I was just explaining to these idiots about this club I belong to." Ralph grew animated and continued talking quickly, as he usually did. "It's a drone racing club across town I've been going to now for about three months. We meet every Thursday at different locations. It's pretty cool, too. Gonna race my drone tonight over at the ole empty K-mart building. They're setting it up now, so I have to go." He started moving away, as though he had much more important things to do.

Miles digested all this quietly and said nothing, watching Ralph go.

Ralph looked back and yelled back at Miles. "Hey bro, you should consider coming down and joining. It's fun!" he added, hoping to get a response. "And besides, one of the guys saw you flying those old-ass helicopters and planes a few weeks back in the park when Kenny got hurt and said you're one hell of a pilot. Anyway, think about it. By the way how's Kenny?"

"He's still in the hospital and I don't think he's doing good. I go every day but he's sleeping a lot. "

"Aw man I'm sorry to hear that" turning away not wanting to engage further in that disheartening moment. "Look, I gotta go"

Ralph quickly remarked, turned and hollered back. "Let me know if you're interested in checking us out."

Looking envious, Miles stared up into the sky. "Yeah, wish I could fly them, but my ole man said I can't fly helicopters or planes ever again because of what happened to Kenny. You know how that goes, Josh," he said to a short, stocky boy with long dreadlocks and a bit of a Jamaican vibe to him.

"So, what's your ole man gonna do, arrest you?" Josh mocked in a Bob Marley accent.

The other two boys let out some "Yah, mahn" asides, long and drawn out, mimicking Josh because they thought it sounded cool. Then everyone started to laugh aloud; they were a million miles away from the Caribbean, and they knew it. Even Miles joined in, although he felt somewhat embarrassed about being a policeman's son.

"You want to go down to the bike park and do some jumping with us, Miles?" Josh asked, with much less of an accent.

"Naw, I need to get on home and get my chores done before my ole man gets home and goes hard ass on me," he said while turning his bike around towards home.

"Give me a call when he arrests you and we'll take up collection to bail you out," Josh hollered while the group started to head to the bike park.

Sitting in his bedroom after dinner, Miles started Googling 'drone flying' on the web. He became enthralled by what he saw, watching videos of screaming machines banking and twisting as a heavy rock beat backed it all up. "It can't be that hard to fly a drone professionally," he said to himself, looking at videos and pictures. "But Officer Johnson said I can't fly no more, period" he uttered sarcastically.

Miles looked for a way out. "He said I couldn't fly airplanes and helicopters," he muttered, as he attempted to justify what he was thinking about doing. "Maybe I'll call Ralph and see what he has laying around that I can borrow. I can learn to fly it so my ole man doesn't find out."

Continuing to look on the computer, he was totally impressed with the many types and different functions of each device he saw. With the urge to fly, he switched screens from drone flying enthusiasts to the web site from HS to Flight School and he envisioned being accepted into the program. That would rock! He told himself. He spent the rest of the night in his chair, until he fell asleep with the screen lit up flying drones.

The next day, Ralph came by on his bike. "Hey, what's up Miles?" he asked, slamming on his brakes.

"Ah, nothing. I'm just wanting to do something but you know, nothing really to do. So, Ralph, I've been thinking about what you said the other day about me flying drones. Are they hard to fly? What's so different about drones than say helicopters?" he asked.

Ralph thought about that for a few seconds, like a feral cat instinctively tracking a rat he'd been tracking all day. "Well, I'll tell you. We haven't seen anything yet. They can not only fly, they can hover, or navigate without any input from the pilot. Try that with a helicopter and see how fast you crash. Or what about self-stabilizing or holding a GPS coordinate with a camera that shows real-time views? This shit is getting real, dude."

Miles leaned forward, excited. "Wow. Go onnnn," he said with obvious exaggeration.

"What about it locking on you so it can follow you or your car automatically? And best of all, it has an altimeter that informs you of its flying height. It can fight the strong winds, even tackle gusts up to thirty-five miles an hour, depending on what type of drone you have."

Miles nodded. Wind was a constant problem, especially with a lighter craft.

"And check this out," Ralph continued. "Say you're in the sky and your drone can avoid obstacles in its path and land automatically. Now, that's what drone flying is all about. Everything you know on steroids, man. I know you love your little 'copter, but things are moving so fast, and it's just so cool."

Miles shook his head. "That is so cool," he acknowledged.

"So, to get back to your question about what's so different about them. If you're not racing but just flying around they're pretty easy to fly. You've never flown one before? That's kind of crazy, where you been? I'm surprised we never hooked up to fly them, but I understand we both had things to do and besides you said your parents didn't support that idea."

"I don't know, I kind of like flying what I fly or at least I used to before I was grounded," Miles said defensively. "I'll think about it and maybe one day I'll try 'em," he added hopefully.

"You want to go down to the park? I have a couple micros and I'll show you how to fly 'em," Ralphie said, pulling one out of his back pack.

"Naw, I don't want my ole man to drive by and see me after I was ordered to stop flying," he cautioned, pretending it didn't count for flying drones.

Ralph put it back in his bag. "C'mon, it won't take long. You want to go up to your room and I can show you a few moves to get you started?"

With that, the boys dashed up the stairs. Ralph reached into his back pack and pulled out two quad micros. "These guys are my toys I play around with. They're small, but they pack a bit of sassiness in them. Watch this," he said, as he turned on the drone and transmitter. Ralph held out his open hand, placed the drone on it and immediately flew it off around the small room. "I'll take it up towards the ceiling and WHAM-O I'll do a couple of flips then set it over there on your bed," he said with glee in his eyes.

Miles was stunned to see what that little drone could do. He wanted so desperately to attempt to fly it, but Ralph didn't offer so he remained quiet. Once again Ralph took off and circled the drone, flying up and around the fan that was on. He almost crashed it because of the turbulence but got it quickly under control, saying "These little daddies don't do well in the wind. Watch out for that."

Miles leaned forward. Was that his cue?

Ralph smiled. "Ok, you ready to fly?" He handed the transmitter to Miles, he reached out eagerly. "Hold on and don't start off yet.

Let me turn off the fan so you don't crash it right away. OK, increase the aileron throttle."

Miles did as he was told and immediately flew it into the closet door. It bounced off the door and fell on the floor. "Oh, man, I'm sorry. Hope I didn't break it," he said apologetically.

"It's ok, they're pretty sturdy. But this time, don't give it so much forward stick." Soon Miles was flying within his room, but still not very steady. He felt so cramped and restricted; it wasn't like the park at all.

"Let's charge the drone," Ralph said. "It'll only take about thirty minutes, ok? By the way, do you still go on the roof next door to hang out?"

"Yeah, I do sometimes because I can get away from everyone and it's quiet up there," Miles admitted.

"OK, let's pack everything up and go on the roof. You need more room to fly."

"Are you sure? I don't feel that brave yet," Miles admitted. But his friend had the confidence of youth, so they made their way to the side porch. Miles grabbed ahold of the homemade bridge and slid it across from the missing railing slots to the roof of the vacant building. It took no time for them to get settled.

Ralph again grabbed the micro and sat it down on the roof. Immediately he launched it high into the sky until it almost disappeared. He then brought it back down out of sight, then back on the roof top where he did multiple flips. "I'll take it to the end of the building and bring it right back," he said excitedly, while staring at Miles' face with a grin. "Kind of cool, isn't it? So small, so quiet, and you can do a lot of things with it. Here you fly it now, but just remember small moves do a lot, ok?"

Taking the transmitter, Miles flew the drone only a few feet off the ground and made deliberate turns so as not to drop it over the edge of the building. With some encouragement, he started to get more altitude and made sharper turns. Smiling broadly, he said, "Man, with some practice, this could be fun, bro!" He stared at Ralph and took his eyes off the drone.

"Give it power quick!" Ralph commanded, as the drone dropped down out of sight. It rose to eye level but when Miles attempted to turn it back on the roof, he turned it the opposite direction and it immediately lost power as he let the stick go. Both boys ran to the edge and they could see it on the ground next to a tree. "Look bro, I need to get home anyway, so I'll get it on my way out. Oh, here's the other drone. You keep it with the transmitter and practice. The next time I see you, don't tell me you lost it into a tree or it flew off and you can't find it," he said with a grin. "By the way, here's the charger you'll need, ok?"

Miles was elated. "Thanks, Ralph I'll take good care of it," he assured his friend. They quickly crossed back over to the porch into Miles' bedroom.

Over the next few weeks, Miles was amazed how quickly he was able to control the micro, and he lost interest in flying helicopters and airplanes all together. He was a quick study because the controls for the micro were practically the same for his helicopters. He was able to extract top speed, trim his micro to obtain more precise movements. He took pleasure in getting the micro to hover and he learned to spin it around in any direction.

One time a bird flew by and the micro was soon in chase at full speed. Even though he quickly gave up, it was exhilarating to think he could basically fly like a bird. He could fly backwards at full speed, then turn the micro facing forward. While dropping the micro over to the roof's edge, it became a challenge to fly it down closer to the ground and then bring it back up to him.

One day when he saw Ralph riding his bicycle up the sidewalk, he quickly launched the micro. With a quick directional turn, he dove the drone to within a few feet of Ralph, then circled him a few times before recalling it up to the roof. Leaning over the roof he yelled down a quick "Hey!" and began to laugh aloud. "Check it out, bro, I've been practicing like you said. I love this little micro."

Ralph smiled. "Yeah, I can see. You up for some flying lessons? I'll be right up," he said, hopping off his bike and throwing the chain

around the wheels. Entering the bedroom, he gave Miles a big, loud high five.

"You charged and ready to go?" Miles asked.

"No, but It'll only take about thirty minutes," Ralph replied.

"While we wait, I'll tell you what I've been doing." With that, Miles began his story of how he learned to use the transmitter, being able to fly the micro in any direction at full speed, take it out to its furthest direction, swoop down and climb. He explained how he could hover because he had been playing around with the trim nodes. The best part, he explained, was that he was able to dart in and out of the tallest tree and then bring it all back as if to scan himself.

"Nice, bro. Ok, you ready for some lessons? Here's what we're gonna do. I'll take the lead and you follow me and do what I do. Set your speed at the lowest setting and try to keep up, ok?"

Reluctantly, Miles set his drone at the slowest speed and away they flew. Soon they were flitting through the air, up, down, flipping, diving, in and out of the trees, quick stops, and more flips. They were synchronized tightly, hovering, spinning around and performing amazing stunts. Miles was pleased that he was able to keep up with Ralph, and he occasionally drew excited praise in the form of "Oh yeah!"

"Not bad, huh? Keeping up with you pretty good," Miles said with a wide smile, while chasing and doing everything that Ralph was executing.

"Yeah, well let's go all the way. Click to the faster mode. I'll leave your ass in the dust," Ralph said with confidence as he slammed the throttle forward.

The battle was on. When Ralph winked at Miles, he didn't see the maneuver that allowed Miles to catch up to him. Straining to put the micro through all the maneuvers he was aware of, he noticed how good Miles really was. No matter how he dove or climbed, Miles was right behind him. He flew off the rooftop, dove into the trees, skimmed the flat roof, blitzed around the chimney and still couldn't get away.

"Ok, I'm convinced. You really do know how to fly that micro!" Ralph acknowledged, as he brought the craft back to his hand. "You should really think about what I told you about, coming down to the club and see real drone racing. You'd like it, and the guys are pretty cool, too."

As Miles brought his micro back to his palm, it was just in the nick of time because it had lost all the power and dropped at his feet. As he bent down to pick it up, he noticed they were not alone. It was Kenny, who had been watching with amazement.

"What ya doing Miles?" he wondered, while walking across the bridge to the roof.

"None of your business," Miles replied, knowing they were caught red-handed at something that Miles was told not to do. "Now, don't you go telling Mom or Dad," he ordered in a tone that sounded like he was begging. "Ralph had just come by to show me his latest micro drones and gave me a chance to fly it quickly, right Ralph?"

"That's not what I saw" Kenny charged, knowing he had them where he wanted. "If you teach me how to fly your micro, I won't tell on you," he bargained confidently.

"The micros aren't mine, they're Ralph's, and I don't have any to teach you on," was all Miles could manage. He knew how weak it sounded.

"Hey bro, I didn't know Kenny was out of the hospital. When did he get out?"

"He's been out for a few days and supposed to be in his room resting" he replied.

As Ralph gathered up his micro, he thought for a minute. "Look Miles, you can keep this little guy and teach little bro how to fly it, and then you won't get in trouble if he squeals on you." With that he walked across the bridge and yelled back as he was climbing through the window. "Good luck and remember, don't wreck my micro."

With that, he disappeared, leaving Miles and Kenny on the roof. Miles knew that the last time they flew together, Kenny got

stabbed, and Kenny's inability to fully control the craft, or else his natural inclination to show off, was actually the cause for Miles not being able to fly again.

He took a deep breath, then shook his head. "You listen here little bro. You know how mom and dad feel about me flying, and that goes double for you. Besides you just got out of the hospital. This is serious stuff, and if I teach you how to fly you can never, and I mean never, say anything, you understand? If you do we're both screwed."

"I promise, I won't say anything ever, I promise," was the earnest reply.

CHAPTER 5: First Race

Seemingly at every waking moment, Kenny pestered Miles into taking him up to the roof where he could learn to fly the micro. He had to change a couple of the blades after Kenny rammed the micro into the side of the roof, but nothing was so damaged that it couldn't be flown again. He enjoyed taking off and landing at different locations, and soon Miles set up some PVC hoops on the roof to fly through like a miniature obstacle course. They timed themselves and invented several different games to test each other; over time, Kenny even won a couple of heats, although Miles told him that he “let up” so he could win. In truth, Kenny was getting proficient.

The younger brother was never allowed to fly off the roof or to fly out of range. Kenny finally lost interest when his friends picked up the latest Artificial Intelligence game, Armageddon became the single thing he thought about. At first, Miles missed Kenny always pestering him, but he understood that a young boy needed friends besides his older brother.

Miles was no longer challenged flying the micro on the roof, and he became obsessed about taking Ralph up on his suggestion. He remembered so well that his Dad had prohibited him from flying helicopters and airplanes, but he rationalized a drone wasn't one of those things. Over and over in his mind he was being drawn closer to violating that order, but when he finally gave in to the temptation, he just grabbed the transmitter and micro and headed back out on the roof. It was there that he found his solitude, but he dreamed of something more, even if he didn't know what that was.

One Saturday while lying on his bed thinking about drones, Miles received a text from Ralph. "Big race 2nit @ 11 PM. Undrgrnd prkg gar 10th&Yamhill." Miles stared at the message and deciphered it. There was a big race tonight at the underground parking garage at 10th & Yamhill. Interesting.

He called up Ralph for more information. "Yeah, dude, this will be major," his friend gushed excitedly. "It's open because of a water main break that crosses at the entrance. They only work on weekdays, and so we're gonna do it tonight. It'll be our club against a cross town rival. The cones and hoops will get set up earlier and by the time we get there, we'll have probably a good hour before we have to scoot because we didn't get permission to be there. So, if you're in, hit me back and I'll swing by around ten or so. Out." Ralph hung up quickly, and Miles stared at the phone. Could be epic, he thought. He wrestled with his conscience a bit more, negotiated several chores from his mother to allow him to spend the night at Ralph's, then texted back "IN."

Just before reaching the underground parking garage, Ralph and Miles met up with three more of his friends who were also raring to go. Across the street four members of the rival club, FlyN Fast, showed up. They were tricked out, all wearing matching T-shirts sporting the phrase Got Speed. After eyeing each other warily, they greeted each other.

The competitors next darted into the garage and pedaled down to the lowest level. It was chosen because that would give them the advantage of getting away if caught, because there were three exits and the sound was more muffled from that level. As per custom, one person from each club met to discuss the race parameters. Ralph did the honors for his crew, and was soon in discussion with his counterpart. The rest of the racers parked their bikes and made the last-minute adjustments to the painted PVC gates.

Next, the two teams huddled up. Miles hung out with Ralph's team while they discussed tactics, positioning, and order. Ralph repeated his instructions to be on alert for the cops or security that

might stumble on them while patrolling the garage. Winning the race was important; not getting busted was even more so.

Everyone who agreed to race set up their drones, and synced their head gear to make sure their cameras pointed slightly upward to give them a better heads-up view. They each settled on a radio frequency that was unique. The visiting team had someone use a heavy chalk line to mark the starting and finishing line. One from each team would do rock, paper, scissors to see who would do the countdown to start the race.

Miles couldn't totally believe he was actually going to observe this race. Ralph called him over and told him to wear his extra Lite Head goggles and he'd use his extra pair. The call was on. Everyone got one practice lap to ensure they knew where all the markers, tubes and rings were. Ralph was confident as ever, as he had flown against the FlyN Fast's before. "Hey, Miles I want you to stand or sit right here and no matter what happens stay put because any movement usually distracts the pilots and you don't want to get thrown out of the club before you get in, ok?"

Miles moved to his assigned spot and stared intently as the racers placed their drones behind the starting line. He mentally inspected each machine, recognizing some from web videos, and dying to interrogate their owners about the technical specs. He wanted to know more about why some chose the designs, colors, head gear, and transmitters they were using. He mentally filed away his questions, as he knew it would be better to ask after things settled down. Plus, he was keen to see who won; he picked out a couple that he thought would be contenders.

Seven drones were lined up ready to go when the starter began his countdown. "Remember five laps only and afterwards we'll compare notes over at Alley's Game Room and set up our next race." Miles looked around and noticed that while all the drones were lined up neatly, the actual racers were spread out. Some were halfway down the course, another was sitting on his bike seat and another had brought a miniature triple leg chair. "Ok here we go. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one. GO!"

Immediately all the drones went airborne and quickly geared down into racing speed. Looking at Ralph's drone through the head gear made Miles sway and duck and make disturbing sounds thinking Ralph was going to crash. Someone told him sternly to shut up, which he sheepishly did.

On lap one, everyone was spread out. Some were low to the ground, while others coasted midway up and a couple chose to cling to the ceiling. The turns were unbelievable, and after a lap Miles took off the goggles and watched with his own eyes. But they darted by so fast he didn't see much, so he quickly replaced the goggles and took a deep breath. Suddenly there was a groan from one of the contestants on the other team when his drone came too close to the concrete pillar and it crashed violently, sending pieces everywhere. Miles saw it all, and he was thrilled. This sport was for keeps!

The contestant walked over to Miles and they exchanged a somber fist bump. Miles saw he was Asian, maybe his own age, with long hair that swept across his forehead and a faint beard. He sighed. "I'm Lee," he said.

"Miles. Tough break."

"My bad," Lee said. "I was pushing too hard. Your boy Ralphie is on fire."

Miles smiled. "Yeah, he loves this." Motioning to the controller, Miles frowned. "So, got a spare?"

Lee nodded. "Yeah, but that was my best rig. I'll have to rebuild another one before the next event. Most drone pilots don't go RTF, but I do."

"RTF?"

"Ready to Fly. A full setup, ready out of the box. Most pilots like to get all the parts and build a Frankendrone just the way they like it, but I wreck so many I don't have time."

Miles frowned. "Sounds expensive."

Lee shrugged. "Trust fund." They both smiled.

In no time, the race was over, but not without controversy. There was a small dispute between the two clubs; one contestant

said Ralph missed the loop and flew alongside of it. But when they crowded around a laptop to look at the video, it turned out to be some fine piloting, and no infraction.

The challenger, a young white teenager with wicked dark sideburns, backed down immediately. "Sorry, my bad. You're too good, Ralph!" he said heartily, and the tension evaporated. The boys set up their second batteries and prepped for another go, Miles had wandered up to the lookout point and came running down quickly.

"Bike cop!" he hissed, and in a frenzy, the teams packed up their belongings, grabbed the gates and mounted up. In seconds, they were gone, leaving no evidence save for some shattered shards from Lee's destroyed drone.

Chattering amongst themselves, the pilots rode out to the designated meeting place. Everyone was blabbering about the course, mentioning how easy it was and that there weren't enough barriers. Suddenly, the chattering stopped as it dawned on Ralph who was complaining the loudest about the easy course – Lee, who had been the first – and only – pilot to crash.

"Says the guy who trashed his drone," Ralph laughed.

Lee blushed. "Well, sometimes I crash on the first lap, so it must have been an easy course!" he joked.

The FlyN Fast team leader took a swig off of his soda and tapped Ralph on the shoulder. He was a tall, strapping kid with dreadlocks and an easy smile that set off his athletic build. "Ralphie, who's the quiet kid you're hanging out with? He hasn't said a word all night long."

Miles looked around. "Just trying to stay out of the way, that's all," he shrugged. "What an extreme sport," Miles said with enthusiasm. "You guys rule."

Ralph laughed. "Shawn, this is Miles. I invited him to see what we do. He's a damn good helicopter and airplane pilot, but it's time to put away those kid's toys and step up to the big leagues," Ralph laughed.

"He must be pretty rich to be flying those aircraft," Shawn said with a whistle.

Ralph shook his head. "Sorry, RCs. He flies RC's, not the real deal. I've been showing him some moves with micro drones, and he's thinking about joining our crew."

"Flying micros are nothing compared to flying these drones," Shawn declared. "At one point tonight, we were probably doing sixty miles per hour, and that's pretty good for a parking garage. But if you don't pay attention or take too many risks, you end up with a smoking pile of parts." Looking at his friend Lee, the group laughed out loud.

"It was just Lee's night. It happens to everyone sooner or later," Ralph said.

Shawn nodded, ready to wrap it up. "So, we're gonna meet at Clay's soccer field in two weeks from tonight. It's supposed to be a big sanctioned event with maybe a few heats, so ya better get to practicing cause the FlyN Fast's will definitely represent." There was some testosterone-fueled taunting and wild challenges after that, as one by one FlyN Fast team headed home.

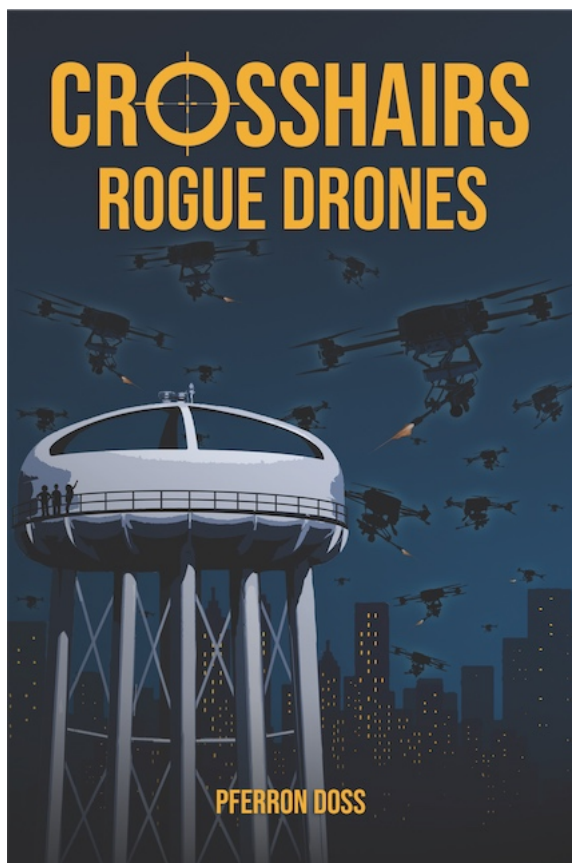
Ralph's group stayed at Alley's Game Room so long they were told they had to leave as it was closing time. They agreed to welcome Miles into the club, and Ralph volunteered to get him squared away as to when they meet and what dues to pay. On the way home, Ralph told Miles some more good things about the club, and said he'd like being a member. "I know you're not much of a joiner, and you wonder what you're getting yourself into. But you can see the league is pretty diverse. We don't play that race crap here. You're judged by how you fly and not the way you look or speak, other than the teasing that sometimes get out of hand," Ralph said with a smile. "I get teased about my thick glasses and weight, and I guess being half Hispanic, but they know I can outfly most of them. A couple of Blacks joined us awhile back but quit out of the blue. That happened before I joined and I don't know what their reasons were."

Miles said nothing, letting it all sink in. "To each his own, I guess," he finally said.

"Yeah, I guess. You still wanna crash at my house?" Ralph asked.

"Nah, I'm ok," Miles said. "I'll just tell Mom you have to get up early."

Ralph shrugged. "OK, no problem. I'll catch you later. Practice your moves!" he said, and they slapped out an elaborate fist bump before splitting up.



There used to be a time when men stood back to back, took ten paces, turned and shot. Now you sit on your front porch and send your drone out two miles to do your shooting for you.

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