

HOVER CAR RACER

MATTHEW REILLY

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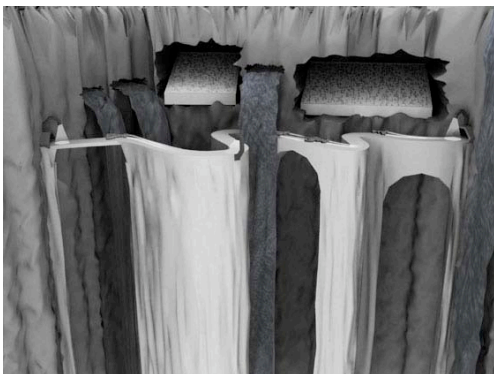
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MATTHEW REILLY

PART VIII:
JASON AND THE GOLDEN FLEECE





CHAPTER ONE

NEW YORK CITY, USA (SATURDAY)

RACE 3: THE PURSUIT

LAP 120 OF 120

The *Argonaut* screamed down the Hudson River at top speed, with Etienne Trouveau's *Vizir* right alongside it, banging against it, ramming it—on the very last lap of Race 3—and with only one turn to go, the fearsome Liberty's Elbow, Jason and Trouveau were out in front of the other racers, battling it out for the win.

The world blurred around Jason. The buildings of New York City. The bridges. The vast hoverstands flanking the river.

This race had been bitter. Bitter and tough.

But now it had come to this—one turn, two racers.

The *Argonaut* dived into the Elbow. So did the *Vizir*.

Jason battled the G-forces, gritted his teeth.

6-Gs...

The *Vizir* was still beside him.



7-Gs...

The *Argonaut* began to shake.

Jason gripped his steering wheel with all his might.

8-Gs and Jason's vision started to darken, the initial stages of blacking out.

Gotta stay conscious! he told himself. *Gotta stay conscious!*

But the *Vizir* was still beside him.

Worse, it was creeping *past* him, round the outside on the terrible turn!

How was Trouveau doing it! Jason's mind screamed.

8.5-Gs...

Jason started to feel nauseous. He'd never survived this many G-forces before—but all he could think of was the *Vizir* edging away from him, slipping out of his grasp, *beating him* in this race that he had to win to stay in the Masters.

Had to win.

Win.

Then the end of the giant hairpin came into view and—
—Jason blacked out.

The *Argonaut* was instantly flung clear of the Elbow.

Jason flopped back in his seat like a rag doll. Dimly, he heard the Bug scream in terror as their car rocketed out of control over the demag lights flanking the turn, screaming like a wounded fighter jet, before it flipped and bounced horribly on the surface of the harbour—pieces of it being stripped away in the process. Then the *Argonaut* slammed at tremendous speed into the carcass of another car that had crashed in the same manner earlier in the race and which was blocking the nearest Dead Zone.



There was no chance to eject. No chance of survival.
The *Argonaut* hit the wreck and exploded.

Jason awoke with a shout—dripping with sweat and breathless to the point of suffocation.

He caught his breath, and recognised his surroundings: he was in his cousin's bedroom in New Jersey. The Bug lay in the single bed beside his, snoring happily.

The digital clock next to Jason ticked over to 4:44 a.m.

It wasn't yet Saturday.

Race 3 had not been run.

It had just been a bad dream. A really bad dream.

But the emotions of it lingered: Jason's overwhelming desire to win, his pain at watching Trouveau pull away, the nausea of the G-forces, the descent into black-out, and worst of all, Jason's fear of that turn, Liberty's Elbow.

He just didn't like Liberty's Elbow—it was perhaps the toughest turn in racing and today, like it or not, Jason was going to be taking it once every minute for two hours.





CHAPTER TWO

NEW YORK CITY, USA (SATURDAY)

RACE 3: THE PURSUIT

Race 3 of the New York Masters is a variety of race known as a 'Collective Pursuit Race'.

Just like the pursuit races Jason had run in the School tournament, it involved racers blasting around a relatively short circular track—in Race 3, it was a lap of Manhattan Island, starting and ending at the Brooklyn Bridge. Each lap took approximately one minute: redefining the term 'quicker than a New York Minute'.

But this track featured obstacles:

Firstly, *ion waterfalls* that rained down from all of the bridges of New York City. They looked like upside-down fireworks displays: the luminescent gold particles of the ionised waterfalls wreaked havoc on magnetic and electrical systems. If you missed the one-car-wide gaps in



the (moving) waterfalls, and accidentally drove your car *through* the falling curtain of golden ions, your car emerged on the other side as merely the shell of a hover car—no power, magnetic or electrical. A horrible crash usually ensued.

Secondly, *the Meat Grinders*: there are two forks in the Pursuit course, at Roosevelt Island and at Ward's/Randall's Island (they are in fact one island, but were once two, hence the double name). At both forks, racers can take a longer, less dangerous route to the right-hand side.

The *left-hand* fork, however, is much shorter—but in both cases it contains an enormous iron wall, forty metres thick, blocking the way completely. In the centre of each iron wall is a narrow cylindrical tunnel. The thing is, the walls of this tunnel—the *entire* tunnel—open and close in an iris-like fashion. If a racer chooses to take the short route, and gets caught in the closing tunnel, that racer can be crushed, hence the name 'meat grinder'. More often, desperate racers opt to take the short route, miss the opening of the tunnel, and lose even more time waiting for it to re-open.

And, of course, at the very end of each lap, at the end of the superlong and superfast Hudson River Straight, *Liberty's Elbow* loomed. It was the final challenge for every racer—pitting one's body against one's desire to win. As had happened to Jason in his dream, it was not uncommon for drivers to knock themselves out taking the Elbow, allowing their desire to win to overcome their good sense.

There was also one extra feature, unique to this race, known as *The 15-Second Rule*.



In short, every racer had to stay within 15 seconds of the lead car. As the leader passed underneath each bridge, a timer was initiated. After 15 seconds, the ion waterfall on that bridge flicked from gold to red—and the gap in the waterfall closed, turning it into an impassable wall of ions. Meaning if you failed to stay within 15 seconds of the leader, you could physically go no further. You were out of the race.

At this point in the Masters, since there were only eight contenders left, the scoring system also changed.

For the final two races, the winner still got 10 points.

The 2nd placed racer, however, now only got 8 points; 3rd got 6 points; 4th: 4 points; 5th: 2 points; and the last three drivers, nothing. Those racers who DNF'd—Did Not Finish—still got a flat zero points.

For Jason, the situation was clear.

Sitting on only 8 points, a full 8 points behind the leaders in the series, he needed a good finish in this race—top two at least—and he needed some of the other racers to finish poorly or not at all.

But if he'd learned anything this year, it was that in hover car racing, *anything could happen*.

As daylight broke on Saturday, Manhattan Island had essentially become one gigantic stadium.

Enormous crowds swarmed all over the outer banks of the East River, the Harlem River and the Hudson River, all facing inwards. While on Manhattan itself, New Yorkers had commandeered every piece of available viewing space—from parks and buildings to the major freeways that ringed the edges of the island: the Henry



Hudson Parkway, West St and the FDR—all looking outward.

And the subject of their collective gaze:

The eight humming rocket cars hovering above the waves of the East River, in the shadow of the mighty Brooklyn Bridge.

Jason and the Bug sat hunched in the *Argonaut*, eyeing the river stretching away before them.

Fabian's *Marseilles Falcon* sat on their left and Trouveau's *Vizir*—Jason had discovered that it was named after Napoleon's horse—on their right.

'Anything can happen...' Jason said aloud.

It was about to.

The lights went green and the race began.



CHAPTER THREE

NEW YORK CITY, USA (SATURDAY)

RACE 3: THE PURSUIT

LAP: 1 OF 120

Eight cars.

120 laps.

On one very short track.

To Jason, the three rivers of New York resembled one continuous watery trench, flanked by hills of roaring spectators and spanned intermittently by sweeping bridges, from which cascaded the spectacular golden ion waterfalls.

The first bridge after the Brooklyn Bridge was the Manhattan Bridge, but since it was so close to the Brooklyn, its waterfall wasn't initiated till Lap 2. But the next bridge, the colossal Williamsburg Bridge, like the first turn of any race, was a crunch point.

Its golden waterfall was most certainly active—and by the time the eight racers reached it, they had to be in



single file in order to pass through the narrow opening in its curtain of golden ions.

The surface of the East River rushed under the nose of the *Argonaut* as Jason threw every lever forward, banking with the leftward bend in the river toward the tiny gap under the Williamsburg Bridge.

He saw the bridge, saw the gap, saw all the speeding cars around him and wondered: *How the hell are we all going to fit through?*

But in the moment before the bridge was upon them, all eight cars converged like the teeth of a zipper and roared—*shoom-shoom-shoom-shoom*—through the narrow gap.

But then as he shot through the gap in the waterfall in the middle of the field, Jason saw that one car hadn't quite made it through.

It was the second US Air Force driver, Dwayne Lewicki, in his modified F-55 fighter, Car No. 23.

Trailing two cars behind Jason, Lewicki's car emerged on the other side of the waterfall, seemingly all right—but it wasn't.

Lewicki must have clipped the ion curtain.

Slowly, painfully, inexorably, his car peeled away to the right in a soaring downward arc, before it came to an abrupt jarring halt in the Dead Zone in front of the spectators on the eastern shore—out of the race.

'Game on,' Jason said.

Jason roared around the track—all but overwhelmed by the intensity of the racing.

This was unlike anything he'd experienced at Race



School. Cars whizzed across his nose at reckless speeds. Racers bumped and pushed each other. And the crowd, it was always there, always around him, roaring, cheering, almost...well...*baying* for blood. It kind of felt like an old Roman chariot race.

The two Renault drivers, Fabian and Trouveau, had obviously decided to make Jason's life hell.

All round the first lap—and then the second and the third—the two Frenchmen badgered Jason, the pair of them taking calculated swipes at both his tailfin and his nosewing, zeroing in on the *Argonaut* with their bladed nosewings.

Every time they cut in, the New York crowds booed.

And every time Jason evaded their thrusts, the crowds cheered. He held them off doggedly.

But it was only a matter of time till their attacks did some damage and on Lap 6 they did.

At Liberty's Elbow, the two French cars cut across the bow of the *Argonaut* in such a way that Jason either pulled out of the turn or lost his nosewing.

He pulled out of the turn—

—and decelerated—

—and watched as the field raced away from him.

'Damn it!' he yelled. 'French bastards!'

He gunned the *Argonaut* once more, and shot off in pursuit—now chasing the 15-second rule.

At each bridge now, he saw a giant digital countdown, telling him how far ahead the leader was (of course, it was Alessandro Romba).

Jason hit the Start-Finish Line at the Brooklyn Bridge eleven seconds behind Romba. Close. But okay.

But in a race like this—by its very nature, tight and



close—that kind of lead could only be regathered in the pits or with the help of a crash.

In the end, Jason would benefit from both.

Pit stops in a collective pursuit race were pre-set—so as not to allow cheap knock-outs when someone pitted. In this race, they were pre-set to take place every 20 laps.

At those stops, Sally performed like a genius. And it was she who hauled in Alessandro Romba's lead—in stops on Laps 20, 40, 60 and 80—in one of those stops, hauling in three whole seconds.

And then things started to get interesting.

LAP: 105 OF 120

Romba was still in the lead, in his silver-and-black Lockheed-Martin.

The USAF pilot, Carver, was in 2nd in his blue F-55.

Then there was a pack of four—among them, Jason.

Last of all, in 7th place, came Jason's quasi-team-mate in the Lombardi Racing Team, Pablo Riviera.

Riviera was languishing in last place, having woefully botched a pit stop on Lap 100, and was now travelling along only just inside the 15-second mark.

And so, in a moment of desperate insanity, he took on the second meat grinder—since it afforded the single greatest gain on the course. It could turn a 13-second deficit into a 3-second one.

He didn't know—or perhaps he didn't have the skill or the nerve to know—that in order to overcome the meat grinders of New York, you had to take them at absolutely full speed: 810 km/h.



But entering a tight iron tunnel no bigger than a garage door at close to the speed of sound is a bit harder than it sounds.

Riviera shot into the meat grinder at a cool 750 km/h.

The long dark cylindrical tunnel enveloped him.

And then the tunnel around him began to iris shut, its gigantic iron cleaves squeezing inward with a loud mechanical clanking, like a giant industrial python suffocating its prey.

And in a moment of clarity, Riviera realised he wasn't going to make it.

He screamed.

The meat grinder squealed with rust as it closed around him.

Its shrieking walls sheared off the tips of his wings first...then they crushed his side air intakes...and his tailfin...and...

The crumpled remains of Riviera's F-3000 was spat out the other end of the meat grinder, battered and unrecognisable; it tumbled into the river, the only thing that had survived: the driver's reinforced safety cockpit. Riviera was alive—just—and only because of the super-solid construction of his car (and the fact that the meat grinder didn't squeeze all the way inward). Not in any way because of his own skill.

Now only six drivers remained in the race.



CHAPTER FOUR

NEW YORK CITY, USA (SATURDAY)

RACE 3: THE PURSUIT

LAP: 110 OF 120

Two separate battles were now taking place on every lap.

Romba and Carver for the lead.

Jason and the two Renault drivers for 3rd. And trailing behind them, only just managing to keep inside the 15-second rule, the General Motors factory team driver, an older Australian driver named Mark Skaife in car 102.

In fact, the 15-second rule performed an admirable service: it kept all of them bunched close together—within striking distance—so that when the chance came, every driver was in a position to strike.

Then the chance came.

When two things happened at once:

First, Angus Carver tried to overtake Alessandro Romba as they roared up the side of Ward's-Randall's Island on Lap 110. Carver tried to sneak inside Romba,



but Romba held his line stubbornly and as they hit the left-hander at the top of the island, they collided—badly—and separated, lurching wildly in either direction, *both of them* hitting the nearby demag lights.

The other thing that happened (at the exact same time) was this: as they shot up the East River behind the two leaders, Fabian and Trouveau, working together, boxed Jason in on the left-hand side of the track, so that when they hit Ward's-Randall's Island, Jason had only two options: crash into Ward's Island, or go left—toward the second meat grinder.

Jason went left.

And he accelerated.

Gave it everything he had. He'd seen the meat grinders enough on TV over the years and every year the commentators said the same thing: you couldn't beat them at anything less than top speed.

So he hit the gas and rushed round the base of Ward's-Randall's Island and beheld the entry to the second meat grinder.

It looked tiny.

Really tiny.

This would be like firing a bullet into a keyhole.

The *Argonaut* rushed toward the tiny opening. Its speedometer topped 800 km/h...

805 km/h...then 810 km/h before—

VOOOOOOM!

The *Argonaut* blasted into the tight cylindrical tunnel—and immediately the tunnel began to iris inwards.

Jason leaned forward in his seat.



The Bug looked up at the rapidly ‘collapsing’ tunnel all around them.

Then the irising walls were so close, they started sparking against the *Argonaut’s* wingtips and Jason thought his car was almost certainly going to die when—*whoosh*—they blasted out into dazzling sunshine again and found themselves...

...in the lead.

With only ten laps to go.

The Bug exclaimed something.

Jason smiled. ‘I’m telling Mum you swore.’

But the jackals weren’t far behind.

Because of their collision, Romba and Carver were cactus, and they were quickly swamped by Trouveau and then Fabian and then Skaife. (Romba and Carver would ultimately duke it out for the still-important 2 points available for the 5th placed racer, fighting right up until they were both eliminated by the 15-second rule—in the end, Romba outlasted Carver.)

Meanwhile, up front, it was Jason against the rest—and with ten laps to run, he now had a golden opportunity *to win the race!*

And from that moment, with adrenaline coursing through his entire body, Jason flew nine of the best laps of his life.

The two Frenchmen couldn’t believe that he’d come out the other side of the meat grinder. They charged with a vengeance.

It was Trouveau—needing the points more than Fabian—who charged harder, and when he stormed



through the first meat grinder on Lap 115, he was suddenly hammering on Jason's tail.

The last four laps of the race would be four of the toughest Jason had ever experienced.

Trouveau hounded him.

But Jason took every turn perfectly.

Well, almost every turn. On each lap, Trouveau gained on him at Liberty's Elbow. The French driver seemed to know it was Jason's weak point—it was as if he could *smell* Jason's fear. He knew that Jason took it gingerly, frightened of the G-forces, frightened of knocking himself out.

And as they commenced the last lap of the race—Lap 120 of 120—Trouveau was travelling almost alongside the *Argonaut*.

And deep in his heart of hearts, Jason knew what Trouveau was going to do.

Trouveau was going to take him at the Elbow.

Up the East River, following the safe route now. Into the narrower Harlem River, under all the bridges spanning it—before blasting out into the Hudson, down its long wide straight, hitting top speed, before suddenly, *she* came into view.

Lady Liberty.

Jason saw her and grimaced.

He knew the score—the Bug had done the math after Romba and Carver had been eliminated: an 8-point 2nd-placed finish wouldn't be enough to beat Carver on the overall ladder. To go through to the next race, Jason needed the full 10 points. He needed to win.



Death or glory, he thought.

And as he hit the Elbow, he knew which one he'd choose.

Into the Elbow, banking left, their cars almost vertical, banking hard.

And then Trouveau—as expected—made his move.

But this time, Jason held his line.

And Trouveau was a little shocked.

Halfway round the Elbow—

—and Jason's vision began to blur at the edges.

7-Gs...

Further round the enormous hairpin...and his vision began to *darken*.

I can make this... he told himself.

I can make this...

8-Gs...

Blinking. Trying...so hard...

8.5...

...to...stay...conscious...

Trouveau was almost beside him now, but the Frenchman couldn't get past.

9-Gs...

And Jason's face was pressed against his skull, his cheeks sucking backwards, his teeth clenched hard and he realised with a thrill that this time—yes!—he was going to make it...

Then he blacked out.



CHAPTER FIVE

NEW YORK CITY, USA (SATURDAY)

RACE 3: THE PURSUIT

LAP: 120 OF 120

Jason awoke—

—to the sound of ecstatically cheering crowds...and to someone banging on his helmet.

It was the Bug hammering on his helmet, trying to rouse him.

As for the crowd, they seemed to be cheering: ‘We love the Buuuuug! We love the Buuuuug!’

Jason was sitting in the *Argonaut*, but it was stationary now—caught in a Dead Zone—hovering above the low waves of the East River, but *past the Finish Line*.

Jason looked about himself in astonishment—he had no recollection of how he had got from Liberty’s Elbow to the Finish Line.

Then he saw an action replay on a giant-screen TV on the riverbank: saw the *Argonaut* blast out of the Elbow,



levelling out of its high-banking turn ahead of the *Vizir*, and roar past the camera.

And there, depicted in glorious slow-motion on the television image, leaning over Jason from behind, clutching at the *Argonaut's* steering wheel, guiding the car over the last few hundred metres, was the one student at the International Race School who had survived a 9-G banking turn.

The Bug.

More than that, the *Argonaut* had retained its speed from the turn (evidently, despite losing consciousness, Jason had kept leaning on his thrusters), and with the Bug at the controls, it had outrun Trouveau to the Brooklyn Bridge!

The *Argonaut*, with its pilot unconscious and its navigator leaning over him to steer, had won the damn race!

Now the Bug was smiling broadly. He explained to Jason what had happened.

'I what?' Jason asked. 'I kept all our thrusters on, even after I knocked myself out?'

The Bug nodded, added something.

'You could say that,' Jason replied. 'You could say I wanted to win this race *really* badly.'

The points immediately went up on the leaderboard.

10 points for Jason.

8 for Trouveau.

6 for Fabian, who took 3rd place easily.

4 for the Australian Skaife—a fine effort, but not enough to take him to the final round.



And a most unusual 2 points for Alessandro Romba, for his 5th placing; while the USAF pilot, Carver, got zero for coming 6th.

And suddenly, with the two USAF pilots both scoring no points at all and the overall leader scoring poorly, the scoreboard told a new tale:

DRIVER	LIBERTY SUPERSPRINT	MANHATTAN GATE RACE	THE PURSUIT	THE QUEST	TOTAL
1. ROMBA, A (1) Lockheed-Martin Racing	10	6	2		18
2. FABIAN (17) Team Renault	9	7	6		22
3. TROUVEAU, E (40) Team Renault	8	3	8		19
4. CARVER, A (24) USAF Racing	7	10	0		17
5. LEWICKI, D (23) USAF Racing	6	9	DNF		15
6. SKAIFE, M (102) General Motors Factory Team	5	4	4		13
7. HASSAN, R (2) Lockheed-Martin Racing	4	0			4
8. REIN, D (45) Boeing-Ford Team	3	1			4
9. CHOW, A (38) China State Racing	2	DNF			2
10. REITZE, R (51) Porsche Racing	1	2			3
11. RIVIERA, P (12) Lombardi Racing Team	0	5	DNF		5
12. CHASER, J (55) Lombardi Racing Team	0	8	10		18



13. REITZE, H (50) Porsche Racing	DNF				
14. MARTINEZ, C (44) Boeing-Ford Team	DNF				
15. PETERS, B (05) General Motors Factory Team	DNF				
16. IDEKI, K (11) Yamaha Racing Team	DNF				

All of a sudden, Angus Carver had gone from leading on 17 points, to being eliminated on 17 points, while Fabian—wily Fabian—had shot up the scoreboard with his solid 6-point finish, surging into first place on 22 points, three points clear of his nearest rival, his teammate, Etienne Trouveau.

But most astonishing of all was Jason, who with his massive 10-point bonanza, found himself on 18 points, and in the top four, leapfrogging three racers with one big jump. The Bug had been right: that final turn had made all the difference; 8 points would not have been enough.

Jason couldn't believe it.

His parents couldn't believe it.

The crowds couldn't believe it.

The commentators couldn't believe it.

Thanks to the Bug, the one and only Bug, the *Argonaut* was in the fourth and final race of the New York Masters.



CHAPTER SIX

NEW YORK CITY, USA (SATURDAY EVENING)

That evening, a silence fell on the New Jersey home of Jason's cousins.

After Team *Argonaut*'s efforts in the Pursuit earlier that day, one would have expected an uproarious celebration, with champagne corks popping and soft drink spraying.

But no, that wasn't happening tonight.

The weight of it all had finally hit home; the magnitude of what Team *Argonaut* had achieved this week. After three ultra-tough pro-level races, tomorrow Jason, the Bug and Sally would be participating in one of the most prestigious events in world racing—and also one of the most dangerous.

Everyone sat around the dinner table in contemplative silence: Jason, the Bug, Henry and Martha Chaser, the Chaser cousins, Sally McDuff and her family, and Ariel Piper.



Indeed, the silence—a grim hush of fear and awe—was deafening.

The only one who wasn't fazed by it all was Scott Syracuse, but then, he'd been here before in a professional capacity and so was used to the pressure.

'You know...'
Syracuse said, breaking the uncomfortable silence, 'the other racers, they're only men.'

Others in the room kept their heads bowed. Jason alone looked up at his teacher.

Syracuse shrugged. 'People see racers like Fabian and Romba, and they think they're superhuman. Men of steel. Bold champions who fly at astronomical speeds without fear or nerves. But they're not superheroes. Oh, no they're not. They are ordinary men, with fears and loves and weaknesses like you and me.'

'This is why we love sportspeople—from Tiger Woods to Donald Bradman to Muhammad Ali—they handle a kind of pressure that most people cannot even imagine. They stand on a golf course or in a stadium or in a ring, with hundreds of thousands of viewers watching them and somehow their legs don't fall from under them. And then—*then*—they *keep* standing and, under all that scrutiny, *they do what they have practised for so long and they do it well*. That's why we love them. We think *we* would fail, and yet they don't. But that doesn't mean they aren't afraid.'

'Jason, Bug, Sally. As your teacher, I've watched you develop this past year; watched you grow from young wide-eyed hopefuls with some talent...into *racers*. When you started with me, you were good. Now you are great. Great at your individual duties, and a great team—from going to lessons when you were too tired to think; to



pitching in together to perform manual pit stops; to pushing your car over the Line; to the Bug taking over the steering when it was necessary.

‘You’re *racers* now. And believe me, you’re ready for this. You may not think so, but as someone who knows racing, trust my judgement: you are ready to stand up in front of the world, and your legs will not fall out from under you. You’ve done the work, you have the skill and you most certainly have the desire. It’s time for you to do what you came here to do: win the Masters.’





CHAPTER SEVEN

NEW YORK CITY, USA (SUNDAY)

RACE 4: THE QUEST

'Do you have it, Mum?' Jason asked as they arrived in the Sixth Avenue pits for the fourth and final race of the Masters series.

Martha Chaser opened her purse for him to see inside, and sure enough, there it was, his 'trophy' for the Quest.

The format of a quest race is simple: all racers head out from the Start-Finish Line to a faraway point, where they pick up their chosen trophy—it can be anything really, but usually racers choose something of significance to them: a medal they won once, perhaps, or their national flag.

Either way, the first racer to come back across the Start-Finish Line *with his or her trophy in their possession* wins. The twist comes in the journey itself—and the journey in the Masters' Quest was a particularly difficult one.



Typically, Jason's mother had fashioned a very appropriate trophy for Team *Argonaut* to use in Race 4.

'I think we have to give it to one of the officials,' Jason said, taking it from her.

As they reached their pit bay, he handed it to the race official who would transport all four racers' trophies to the farthest point of the Quest course.

The *Argonaut* sat in its pit bay, glistening, shining, *waiting*. It was as if the little blue-white-and-silver car was alive, energised, ready to go, stamping its hoofs in anticipation of the challenge ahead of it today.

Jason eyed his car with pride, thinking of all they had been through together—from the Regional Championships in the swamps of Carpentaria, to his epic efforts at Race School: the gruelling tournament, taking on the Clashing Bergs in the final race; and now, his feats here in New York.

He patted the *Argonaut's* left wing.

'Well, car,' he said, 'here we are again. One more race, that's all I ask of you. One more race. Let's do it.'

And with a final pat, he strode away from the car to go and get suited up for the race.

He never saw the tiny explosive device—it was the size of a pinhead—attached to the tailfin of his beloved *Argonaut*.

It had been placed there during the night by a light-fingered hand...a hand that had paid off one of the security guards to gain access to the pit area...a hand that had laid a similar device on another *Argonaut* once before.



CHAPTER EIGHT

NEW YORK CITY, USA (SUNDAY)

RACE 4: THE QUEST

SECTION: OUTBOUND JOURNEY

The four cars sat on Fifth Avenue, all aimed northward.

Alessandro Romba—in his silver-and-black Lockheed-Martin.

Fabian and Etienne Trouveau in their purple-and-gold Renaults.

And Jason—in the *Argonaut*.

This is what it came down to.

Four contenders.

All within four points of each other.

Romba, Trouveau and Jason had to win Race 4—and have some other placings go their way—in order to take the Masters.

Fabian, however—three points clear of his nearest rival—could come 2nd, garnering 8 points, and still take the overall title.



* * *

The course for the Quest was a long and arduous one—taking the racers all the way across New York State, right to Niagara Falls on the US-Canadian border. There the racers would collect their trophies from a platform suspended high above the falls and begin the journey back to Manhattan.

Now, while the journey both ways was extraordinarily difficult, it was also astonishingly beautiful, but in an unusual way.

For the main feature of the course was a superlong underground highway known as the Endless Tunnel. Before the invention of hover cars, the US Government had started construction of an underground superhighway designed to go from the Canadian border all the way down to Florida, to be known as Superhighway Two.

But then along came hover cars and the project was abandoned: and only the section through New York State was completed—and even then, only roughly.

What remained was a rough-hewn network of long octagonal tunnels cutting through all sorts of underground environments—old mines, subterranean chasms, rivers and waterfalls. Indeed, the construction of the highway had led to the discovery of the now-famous Twin Caves, the largest underground caverns in the world.

Naturally, the Endless Tunnel was now equipped with many small ion waterfalls that cut the tunnel's width in half. Plus lots of single-file-only bridges over the underground gorges and rivers, and not a few dead-end



forks: navigators were provided with a map of the Tunnel and their role in the race was crucial.

Jason sat in his cockpit, eyeing the superlong skyscraper-and grandstand-lined canyon of Fifth Avenue stretching away before him.

‘Your legs will not fall from under you,’ he said aloud.

The Bug didn’t hear him, asked what he’d said.

‘Nothing, little brother. Nothing.’

The crowd murmured—would Alessandro Romba win this race and take the Grand Slam? Or the two Frenchmen? Or perhaps even the young outsider, Jason?

Jason’s parents watched from the grandstand nearest to the Start-Finish Line. Sitting with them were Umberto Lombardi, Scott Syracuse, the McDuff clan and Ariel Piper. Henry Chaser was literally on the edge of his seat with excitement.

The starter for the final race of the Masters was always a celebrity, and this year it was the biggest movie star in Hollywood, Rosemary Anderson. To great applause, she pressed the start button.

Immediately, a loud electronic tone warned everyone that the start lights would ignite in three seconds.

Red light—

Yellow light—

Green light—

Go!

The world blurred.

Super speed. And Jason found himself pushing the



Argonaut to new limits.

Skyscrapers became bridges then houses then open highway as the racers shot up Interstate 87, charging northward, with every piece of available land covered with spectators.

Then the landscape quickly became tree-covered hills, bridges and rivers and—all too soon—the Catskill Mountains came into view. And waiting for him at their base, Jason knew, was the entrance to the famed and feared Endless Tunnel.

Romba was in the lead, where he liked to be, while Jason and the two Renaults swapped and jockeyed for 2nd place, overtaking each other regularly—and all the while, the two French drivers flashed their razor-sharp nosewings dangerously close to Jason's flanks.

And then Jason beheld the entrance to the Tunnel.

It was a massive grey concrete arch, solid as hell, with a dark passageway behind it that yawned black. The opening was flanked by a sea of cheering spectators.

Shoom!

Jason rushed into the blackness.

Arched concrete pillars whistled by overhead in a dizzying display of hyper-repetition. Actually, they weren't so much pillars as 'ribs'—the ribs of the octagonal tunnel.

The four cars roared like rockets through the winding passageway, banking with the bends, flattening out with the straights.

Romba—Jason—Fabian—Trouveau.

At certain points, ion waterfalls halved the width of the



Tunnel, and they had to form up into single file to get past the glittering golden curtains—and sometimes weave left and right when a second or a third ion waterfall appeared directly after the previous one, but on the other side of the underground passage.

And then, gloriously, Jason burst out onto a superlong natural bridge that spanned a subterranean gorge. Bottomless black raced by on either side of the fenceless bridge. But before he could gaze in wonder at the spectacular scenery, Jason was plunged into claustrophobic tunnel-territory once again.

Forks began to appear in the tunnel system.

And for a time everyone just followed Alessandro Romba—trusting his navigator’s map-reading skills—but then Romba got ahead of the others and suddenly the Bug had to make the *Argonaut’s* navigation calls.

But not for long.

Fabian—keen to stay in 2nd place and thus ensure that he won the Masters—started harrying Jason with the help of Trouveau.

The *Argonaut* sped round a bend, avoiding an ion waterfall, before—*whoosh*—it blasted out into an absolutely enormous cavern, the first of the Twin Caves, known as the Small Cave.

Stunning waterfalls blasted out from fissures in the side of the immense cavern, falling 700 feet down a multi-tiered rock wall before disappearing into darkness. Temporary underground hoverstands filled with spectators lined the cavern, their chants echoing in the massive space.

A wide bending S-shaped bridge snaked its way across the face of the multi-streamed falls—at some points



dipping behind the curtains of rushing water. The hover cars on the bridge were dwarfed by the sheer size of the underground water system.

It was here that the two Renaults tried to finish Jason off for good.

The bending bridge was wide enough for the three of them, but it narrowed to a two-car-wide tunnel at its end.

Ominously, the two Renaults swept up on either side of the *Argonaut*.

Jason snapped left, then right. Saw Fabian at his left, Trouveau on his right—both of them so close that he could almost touch them.

A Renault sandwich.

'Uh-oh...' Jason said.

The Renaults had him exactly where they wanted him—in a technique they'd used so many times before to nail their rivals. All Fabian had to do now was push Jason onto Trouveau's bladed nosewing.

Fabian started ramming Jason, forcing him right, forcing him towards...

...Trouveau's flashing nosewing.

Jason rammed Fabian back, fighting the push—nervously eyeing the rapidly-approaching tunnel entrance ahead.

Then Trouveau also pulled in close, bringing his fearsome silver nosewing to within centimetres of the *Argonaut's*.

Jason swung his head left and right. There was nowhere to go. He was being run onto Trouveau's blades and there was nothing he could do about it.

Any second now, they would have him...

Any second...

H O V E R C A R R A C E R



Fabian gave him a final push.
Got him.



CHAPTER NINE

RACE 4: THE QUEST

SECTION: THE ENDLESS TUNNEL (OUTBOUND)

But as Fabian made the killing blow, Jason did something totally unexpected.

He slammed on his brakes.

The *Argonaut* slid backwards in the air and the result of this sudden action was as spectacular as it was surprising.

Fabian—previously pushing hard against the *Argonaut*—suddenly found himself pushing against nothing at all, so his car lunged forward in the air and before he could do anything about it, Fabian saw his own bladed nosewing shear right through Trouveau's!

Trouveau's eyes bulged as he saw his own nosewing drop away—at which point he lost all control of his vehicle and the *Vizir* veered to the right, speeding perilously close to the edge of the winding bridge and the deep drop below it, before it smashed with terrible force



into the vertical concrete frame of the tunnel entrance at the end of the gigantic cave.

Car hit stone.

At 700 km/h.

In a single instant, the *Vizir* transformed from hover car to fireball.

The explosion rang out in the cavern—and the crowds in the stands rose in horror. Trouveau and his navigator would ultimately walk away from the crash, dazed and dizzy, saved only by their reinforced cockpit and anti-crash features. The *Vizir*, on the other hand, would never race again.

It was left splayed across the right-hand side of the tunnel entrance, blocking half of the way.

As for Jason, he was still rocketing along at speed—his braking manoeuvre had only been brief, so he hadn't lost that much ground on Fabian—and the two of them shot past the wreckage of the *Vizir* in single file, and disappeared into the two-car-wide tunnel at the end of the Small Cave.

The tunnel that led out from the Small Cave bent in a wide, wide curve to the right—testing each driver's G-force-resistance like Liberty's Elbow did—before it opened onto the second of the Twin Caves.

This was the Big Cave.

And it made the Small Cave look puny.

It was the largest natural underground space in the world, discovered only a few years previously, and it was utterly breathtaking. Towering waterfalls and rocky pinnacles as high as skyscrapers lined the superlong



cavern. Magnificent naturally formed aqueducts connected some of the pinnacles, and the water running down them spilled off their ends, spraying into the air before dropping away into darkness.

A gently-sloping bridge of rock ran all the way down the length of the mighty cave, stabbed here and there by thin vertical waterfalls that over many years had cut clean through its edges, and it was along this that the racers sped, winding between the thin but powerful jet-streams of water.

Romba, then Fabian, then Jason.

To the roars of the crowds in the hoverstands, the three remaining racers blasted down the rockway and disappeared into the final section of the Endless Tunnel—a section that ended at Niagara.

Niagara Falls.

The sight, glorious. The sound, deafening. The crowds flanking the world's most famous outdoor falls: massing and roiling and bursting with anticipation.

All eyes were glued to the tiny pipe-like tunnel that poked out from the base of the main falls, waiting to see which racer would emerge first.

Alessandro Romba did.

And the crowds went nuts.

Fabian blasted out next, followed last of all by Jason.

The three cars banked quickly, sweeping up the hill on the US side of the Falls, before they all stopped at the landward end of a long thin rail-less footbridge that extended out over the flowing river, at the very precipice of the Falls.



Jason leapt out of the *Argonaut* and, chasing Romba and Fabian *on foot*, he dashed out across the long narrow bridge.

Sitting on a platform at the end of the footbridge were four podiums and on each podium sat each racer's trophy.

Romba's trophy was the Italian flag. He snatched it and turned and began the run back to his car...and the return journey home.

Fabian's trophy was typical Fabian: it was a poster of himself standing with the *Marseilles Falcon*. He grabbed it and dashed back to his car, pushing roughly past Jason as they ran past each other on the narrow bridge.

Last of all, Jason came to his podium.

And he beheld his trophy, crafted by his mother.

It shone in the sunlight like a treasure, haloed by the rainbow created by the spray of the Falls.

A small piece of soft wool.

Painted all in gold.

A golden fleece.

Like his classical namesake, Jason grabbed the fleece, turned, and then ran as fast as he could back to his chariot, and thus began the most thrilling hour of racing he had ever experienced in his short life.



CHAPTER TEN

RACE 4: THE QUEST

SECTION: THE ENDLESS TUNNEL (INBOUND)

Jason jumped into the driver's seat of the *Argonaut* and hit the gas.

The little Ferrari roared off the mark, swinging in a wide circle in the turnaround at the top of Niagara Falls, before descending down the roadway to the base of the Falls, where it swung out over the river and shot like a bullet back into the Endless Tunnel.

Into the dark again.

Heading for home.

Roaring, charging, chasing, racing.

Jason hammered the *Argonaut* through the branch-like passageways of the Endless Tunnel, ducking left, veering right, now engaged with Romba and Fabian in a headlong race for home.

He saw Fabian's tail-lights glowing red not far ahead of



him—and suddenly, there came a voice in Jason’s helmet earpiece, a French-accented voice that shouldn’t have been there.

‘You cannot win, boy.’

It was Fabian.

He must have discovered Jason’s radio frequency and now, in the crunch-zone of the race, decided to put in a taunting call. This was very improper, but not technically illegal.

‘Why keep trying?’ Fabian said. *‘You’ve done so well for a child. Why not leave the rest of this race to the men?’*

Jason eyed the Frenchman’s tail-lights.

‘I’m coming after you, Fabian...’ he said firmly.

And he was.

He was gaining steadily on Fabian as they shot through the dark rocky tunnels, so much so that when they hit the Big Cave, the *Argonaut* sprang alongside the *Marseilles Falcon* on its right-hand side.

Fabian saw Jason and frowned—

‘Peek-a-boo,’ Jason said.

In reply Fabian rammed him.

But Jason swung wide, softening the blow.

This only seemed to enrage Fabian even more and as they shot up the long ramp of the Big Cave, Fabian slammed the *Marseilles Falcon* into the *Argonaut* again.

Jason, however, was up to the challenge, and he held his line as the two cars swooped up the bridge side-by-side and shot into the long sweeping (now) leftward curving tunnel that connected the Big Cave to the Small Cave.

Banking with the turn.

Flying hard.



Flying fast.

Fabian on the inside, Jason on the outside, their cars positively galloping, tearing the very fabric of the air with their speed.

And then, in a fleeting moment, Jason saw Fabian's eyes in his helmet—saw them glaring over at Jason with pure derision and hatred.

'I'm gonna get you, you little punk!'

'Not today,' Jason said.

'And why exactly not?'

'Because I've remembered something you haven't,' Jason said.

And as he said it, they rounded the final segment of the curve together, perfectly side-by-side—Fabian on the left, Jason on the right—and the thing that Jason had remembered suddenly came upon them.

The wreckage of Etienne Trouveau's car.

It was still crumpled up against the entrance to this tunnel—now the exit—blocking the entire left-hand side of the track.

Fabian's side of the track.

Fabian saw it too late—and his eyes boggled at the sight—and at the realisation that Jason had got the better of him; had deliberately got him to travel on this side of the track, heading straight for his team-mate's wreck.

Fabian screamed.

Then he covered his head as the *Marseilles Falcon* exploded *clean through* the remains of the *Vizir*, sending pieces of the two Renaults showering out in a huge star-shaped spray—while at the same time, the *Argonaut* shot past the double wreck in total safety.

The central core of Fabian's car actually survived the



trip through the *Vizir*—although unfortunately for Fabian, its wings, nosewing and tailfin hadn't.

The battered remains of his car shot off the nearest edge of the S-shaped bridge in the Small Cave and sailed down into blackness...

...where, perhaps undeservedly, it would be caught in a safety Dead Zone, its race run.

Needless to say, the crash's effect on the race, on the entire Masters Series, was electrifying.

Fabian had just DNF'd—meaning he would get *no* points at all for this race. His Masters Series was over.

Now the Masters would be fought out by the last two racers on the track: Alessandro Romba and Jason Chaser.

With the two Renaults out of his hair for good and flying on outrageous amounts of adrenaline, Jason now eyed the tail-lights of Alessandro Romba.

La Bomba Romba.

The No.1-ranked driver in the world, the man seeking to become the first racer ever to claim the Grand Slam, the man who this whole year had never been cleanly passed.

Until today, Jason thought.

A two-horse race.

Romba fleeing.

Jason chasing.

Chasing him as hard as he could.

Down the length of the Small Cave, then into the labyrinthine passages of the Tunnel.

Romba drove hard.



Jason drove perfectly.

And over the course of twenty minutes, he *gained* on the World No.1, moving within a car-length of him before—
—sunlight assaulted them both as they blasted together out of the Tunnel.

Onto the Interstate now, sweeping left and right between the trees and hills—with Jason hammering on Romba's tail, giving the World No.1 absolute hell.

Then Jason made his move, tried to get past Romba on the inside left.

Romba blocked the move—legally, fluidly.

Jason tried again, this time on the right.

And Romba blocked him again.

Jason persisted, left, then right, searching doggedly for a gap, showing the World No.1 no respect.

Then again Jason went left—and Romba went that way too—but this time it was a perfectly disguised fake and Jason suddenly cut right...

...and zipped past Alessandro Romba as Romba overbalanced to the left!

The crowds lining the highway gasped.

Then they *roared* with joy, delighted at Jason's skill.

It wasn't a crash or luck or some foul move that had got Jason past Romba.

It had just been damn good driving.

And suddenly, with only ten minutes left in the New York Masters, *Jason found himself in the lead.*

New York City rose in the distance.

Whizzing down the Interstate, Jason saw its high skyscrapers stabbing the sky.



He gunned the *Argonaut*, trying to shut out all thought of being *in the lead*, being *out in front*, being on the cusp of achieving everything he had ever dreamed of.

Don't think about winning! he told himself. *Don't jump the gun!*

Win the race first.

So he concentrated with all his might.

And in the final run-up to Manhattan, he actually extended his lead on Romba, moving at first a car-length, then a few lengths ahead of the Italian.

Then it was over the Broadway Bridge at the top of Manhattan Island and suddenly he was back in the city and its maze of hard right-angled corners.

The assembled crowds roared at his every turn.

Romba was now seventy metres behind him.

And as he swung out onto Fifth Avenue and realised that he had no more turns to take—that this was the end—that he'd done it—Jason allowed himself a half-grin.

He'd done it...

And then a figure in the crowd watching Jason shoot down Fifth Avenue toward the Finish Line pressed a button on a remote control, triggering the pinhead-sized explosive device attached to the tailfin of the *Argonaut*.

For the second time that year—and for the second time in a Grand Slam Race—the *Argonaut's* tailfin spontaneously exploded.

No! Jason thought. *Not on the home straight!*

'Hang on, Bug!' was all he had time to yell.



Its tailfin gone, the speeding *Argonaut* dropped its nose instantly and ploughed at a sizzling 790 km/h into the pavement of Fifth Avenue.

Sparks flew everywhere.

The *Argonaut's* nosewing dislodged immediately and flew away, loose pieces of the car were stripped off by the wind, while its wings bounced against the pavement and were torn clean off.

And the battered little *Argonaut* skidded to a sideways halt in the middle of Fifth Avenue, a tantalising two hundred metres short of the Finish Line, before it tipped clumsily onto its side, its cockpit pointed towards the Line.

Jason snapped his neck upwards and saw—tilted sideways—the Finish Line, so close but so far away.

'Bug! You okay?'

The Bug said he was.

In a flash, Jason assessed his options.

He knew Romba was close behind him—and by the sound of it, almost on him—too close to beat to the Line on foot as the Bug had done to Barnaby back at Race School.

'Damn it!' he yelled. 'I am *not* gonna lose this race!'

And as he saw Romba's car blur past his stationary position, inspiration struck and Jason jammed his golden fleece in his lap, unclipped his transponder-equipped steering wheel, and did the only thing he could think to do to win the race.

He yanked on his ejection lever.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

RACE 4: THE QUEST

SECTION: FIFTH AVENUE (INBOUND)

It was an image no race-goer would ever forget.

The black Lockheed of Alessandro Romba sweeping past the crumpled wreck of the *Argonaut* just as—*shooooooooom!*—Jason, on his ejection seat, came shooting out of the wreck, rocketing horizontally and head-first, like a human cannonball, a bare two feet above Fifth Avenue where he...

...overtook Romba's car in flight...

...and shot over the Finish Line one single foot ahead of the shocked Italian!

No sooner was the ejection seat over the Finish Line than it lost all its horizontal momentum and arced downward, and hit the ground and skidded—on its side—kicking up



a million sparks all around Jason, but protecting him with its reinforced construction.

And then it stopped.

A sizzling, steaming crumpled wreck.

Race officials came running from all sides, concerned.

The crowds were stunned into silence.

Henry and Martha Chaser just stared, searching for a sign of life in the smoking ejection seat and the crowd of officials gathering around it.

No-one had ever seen anything like it—the kid had *ejected* over the Line to win!

And then an official lifted Jason from the crumpled mess of his ejection seat and Jason stood, wobbling, and held his steering wheel and golden fleece aloft—

—and the roar that went up from the crowd gathered around the Finish Line was like no other that had ever been heard in the history of hover car racing.

It was so loud, it almost brought the city down.

And Henry and Martha Chaser both breathed a sigh of relief—before Henry leapt into the air, pumping his fists.

'YOU...LITTLE...BLOODY...BEAUTY!' he yelled.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Delirious scenes followed.

Like a dam breaking, the ecstatic crowd burst through the barricades and stampeded onto Fifth Avenue, massing around Jason's crumpled ejection seat.

Jason—now flanked by officials and security guards—sought out Alessandro Romba nearby and shook his hand.

'I'm sorry about the Grand Slam, Mr Romba,' he said.

Romba just smiled ruefully. 'I have a feeling that today might have been my last chance to get it—from now on, I'll be facing a tough new opponent in every race.'

Jason nodded. 'Good race today.'

'You too. Now go, young Chaser. Celebrate.'

'I will,' Jason smiled broadly.

And he ran off down Fifth Avenue, to the wreck of the *Argonaut*, still lying on its side in the middle of the wide



boulevard, where he found the Bug, now standing beside the wreckage.

The two brothers embraced—as camera flashes blazed all around them.

‘Jason! Doodlebug!’ Martha Chaser came running from the VIP stand, with Henry behind her.

Martha grabbed Jason in a great big hug and squeezed him tight.

Henry Chaser stopped a few steps behind her, knowing that the Bug—currently unhugged—didn’t like to be held by him.

He was, then, quite stunned when the Bug leapt up into his arms and cuddled him warmly, resting his head on Henry’s shoulder.

‘Well *done*, son,’ Henry said, his voice breaking slightly. ‘Well *done*.’

‘Thanks...Dad,’ the Bug whispered softly—the first words he’d ever spoken directly to Henry Chaser.

Martha released Jason. ‘I almost had a heart attack when your back fin exploded in the final straight. What was that all about? Why did that happen?’

‘I have an idea,’ Jason said, turning to see Ariel arrive on the scene, escorted by two New York cops who held between them: Ravi Gupta, the Indian bookmaker, with his hands cuffed.

‘Is this him?’ one of the cops said to Jason.

‘Yeah. That’s him,’ Jason said. ‘That’s the guy who put the explosives on my car in Italy and here.’

Both Martha and Henry whirled around. So did all the race officials nearby, levelling their eyes at Gupta.



Jason explained. ‘I realised it the other night when we saw the gambling odds on TV. In racing, you can bet on all sorts of results: me winning, me coming in the Top 3 overall. But what really caught my attention were the odds for me coming in the Top 5 in any race. And suddenly I thought about the Italian Run.

‘Twice in the Italian Run, our team encountered unusual difficulties: that explosion in the home straight, but also before that, just before the second pit stop, when Sally was blocked from getting to the Pescara Pits.

‘And I realised: in both instances those difficulties arose only when I moved *into 5th place*. On the way to the Pescara Pits, I leapfrogged into 5th by cutting the heel. Then my tailfin exploded just after I got past Trouveau and looked like finishing in 5th.

‘And suddenly, I realised: someone didn’t want me to come in the Top 5 in Italy. So I thought about who that could be...and came to one conclusion: gamblers. And there’s been only one bookmaker who’s shown any interest in me. Gupta.

‘So the other night, before I went to bed, I checked his odds on me both here and back in Italy, in particular, Gupta’s odds on me coming in the Top 5 in Italy. They were huge. Gupta stood to lose a fortune if I’d come 5th there, so he’d ensured that I wouldn’t: first by blocking Sally at the Pescara Pits, and second by planting an explosive on my tailfin.’

‘But how could you prove it?’ Henry asked.

‘I couldn’t. I just had to wait—and see if something similar happened today. So I got Ariel to get some cops to watch Gupta for the whole race and...’

He turned to the cop beside Ariel.



The cop said: 'We have digital surveillance footage of Mr Gupta pointing a remote control at the *Argonaut* and pressing a button on that remote a moment before the car's tailfin explodes. Radio-signal surveillance also recorded seek-and-respond signals passing between Gupta's remote and the *Argonaut* an instant before the explosion. Which is why Mr Gupta is coming with us now.'

With that, the cops took Gupta away.

'Gambling...' Sally growled. 'It's bad news.'

'Oh, it's not that bad,' Martha Chaser said daintily.

'And why do you say that, Mum?' Jason asked, surprised.

'Well,' she seemed a little embarrassed to say it, 'as I said I would, I put a dollar on you to win the Masters, way back before the first race of the series, when you were at 1500-to-1. So I just made \$1500. I think I might get myself that new sewing machine now.'

Jason just shook his head and grinned.

And so he was left with his family and his friends and his fleece and the massing cheering waving crowd in the middle of Fifth Avenue, New York, on the Sunday of the Masters...as the winner.

That same grin was still fixed on his face as he stood on Liberty Island, at the feet of the Statue of Liberty, behind the winner's podium, watching Romba (26 points) and Fabian (22 points, having received no points in Race 4 for crashing) receive their wreaths for coming 2nd and 3rd in the Masters.

Then came the moment.



‘And, now, ladies and gentlemen,’ the announcer proclaimed, ‘in 1st place, with a series total of 28 points, two wins, and one 3rd placing, the Masters Champion for this year...Jason Chaser! Team: *Argonaut*/Lombardi. Navigator: Bug Chaser. Mech Chief: Sally McDuff.’

The three of them leapt up onto the podium.

Jason, the Bug and Sally.

And they accepted their wreaths, and the gigantic Masters Trophy.

Then Jason hefted the enormous trophy aloft, above his head, and the crowd just went ballistic.

And as he looked out over them, Jason thought about everything he’d been through the previous year.

It had, without a doubt, been the most incredible year of his life—a year that had begun in the swamps of Carpentaria, proceeded through the many trials of Race School and featured an appearance at the Italian Run, before he had finished off the year winning—yes, *winning*—the most prestigious and demanding race series of all: the New York Masters.

And now, to cap it all off, in his pocket sat a contract from Umberto Lombardi offering him and his team the privilege of racing full-time for the Lombardi Racing Team on the pro circuit next year.

Jason held the trophy high and smiled.

He was Jason Chaser.

Hover car racer.



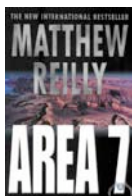
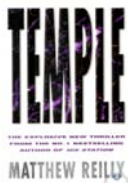
MATTHEW REILLY

THE END

of

HOVER CAR RACER

Also by Matthew Reilly:





Hey there Readers,

Thank you for being part of *Hover Car Racer*, my first full-length novel to be published on the Internet. I really enjoyed publishing it this way and I hope you enjoyed reading it. I love serials, and I think the Internet suits this type of storytelling structure.

For the record, we've had over 110,000 visitors to the website so far, making *Hover Car Racer* a truly successful experiment. And for those of you wanting something for your bookshelves, fear not, all eight parts will be released as one complete novel this Christmas in the UK and Australia (US release will be in early 2005), complete with colour race-maps and diagrams.

And just for you guys, here's some breaking news: Walt Disney Pictures recently acquired the movie rights to *Hover Car Racer*. They bought them after reading Parts 1-5, before they had even read the ending!

Beyond that, the entire story of *Hover Car Racer* will now stay online, and be available for free, until August 20. Then it will be taken offline.

And as always, if you want to get into the prizes, head to www.thepresidian.net and write a haiku! See you later and thanks for coming on the ride!

Matthew Reilly
Sydney, Australia,
20 July, 2004