

JOHN GRISHAM

THEODORE

the accused

BOONE

Theodore Boone: Kid Lawyer

Theodore Boone: The Abduction

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Chapter 1

The accused was a wealthy man by the name of Pete Duffy, and his alleged crime was murder. According to the police and the prosecutors, Mr. Duffy strangled his lovely wife in their attractive home on the sixth fairway of a golf course where he, the accused, was playing golf that day, alone. If convicted, he would spend the rest of his life in prison. If acquitted, he would walk out of the courtroom a free man. As things turned out, the jury did not find him guilty, or not guilty.

This was his second trial. Four months earlier, the first trial had ended suddenly when Judge Henry Gantry decided it would be unfair to continue. He declared a mistrial and sent everyone home, including Pete Duffy, who remained free on bond. In most murder cases, the accused cannot afford to post a bond and stay out of jail while waiting on a trial. But because Mr. Duffy had money and good lawyers, he had been free as a bird since the police found his wife's body and the State accused him of killing her. He had been seen around town—dining in his favorite restaurants, watching basketball games at Stratten College, attending church (with greater frequency), and, of course, playing lots of golf. As he waited on his first trial, he seemed unconcerned with the prospect of a trial and the possibility of prison. Now, though, facing his second trial, and with a new eyewitness ready to be used by the prosecution, Pete Duffy was rumored to be very worried.

The new eyewitness was Bobby Escobar, a nineteen-year-old illegal immigrant who was working at the golf course on the day Mrs. Duffy was murdered. He saw Mr. Duffy enter his home at about the same time she died, then hurry away and resume his golf game. For a lot of reasons, Bobby did not come forward until the first trial was underway. Once Judge Gantry heard Bobby's story, he declared a mistrial. Now, with Bobby ready to testify, most of the folks in Strattenburg, who had been closely watching the Duffy case, were expecting a guilty verdict. It was almost impossible to find someone who believed Pete Duffy did not kill his wife.

And it was also difficult to find a person who did not want to watch the trial. A murder trial in the Strattenburg Courthouse was a rare event—indeed, murder was rare in Stratten County—and a large crowd began gathering at 8:00 a.m., just after the front doors of the courthouse opened. The jury had been selected three days earlier. It was time for the courtroom drama to begin.

At 8:40, Mr. Mount got his eighth-grade class quiet and called the roll. All sixteen boys were present. Homeroom lasted for only ten minutes before the boys went off to first period Spanish with Madame Monique.

Mr. Mount was in a hurry. He said, "Okay, men, you know that today is the first day of the Pete Duffy trial, round two. We were allowed to watch the first day of the first trial, but, as you know, my request to watch the second trial was denied."

Several of the boys hissed and booed.

Mr. Mount raised his hands. "Enough. However, our esteemed principal, Mrs. Gladwell, has agreed to allow Theo to watch the opening of the trial and report back to us. Theo."

Theodore Boone jumped to his feet, and, like the lawyers he watched and admired, walked purposefully to the front of the room. He carried a yellow legal pad, just like a real lawyer. He stood by Mr. Mount's desk, paused for a second, and looked at the class as if he were indeed a trial lawyer.

preparing to address the jury.

Since both of his parents were lawyers, and he had practically been raised in their law offices, and he hung out in courtrooms while the other eighth graders at Strattenburg Middle School were playing sports and taking guitar lessons and doing all the things that normal thirteen-year-olds tend to do, and since he loved the law and studied it and watched it and talked about little else, the rest of his class was quick to yield to Theo when discussing legal matters. When it came to the law, Theo had no competition, at least not in Mr. Mount's eighth-grade homeroom.

Theo began, "Well, we saw the first day of the first trial four months ago, so you know the lineup and the players. The lawyers are the same. The charges are the same. Mr. Duffy is still Mr. Duffy. There is a different jury this time around, and, of course, there is the issue of a new eyewitness who did not testify during the first trial."

"Guilty!" yelled Woody from the back of the room. Several others chimed in and added their agreement.

"All right," Theo said. "Show of hands. Who thinks Pete Duffy is guilty?"

Fourteen of sixteen hands shot upward with no hesitation whatsoever. Chase Whipple, a mad scientist who took pride in never agreeing with the majority, sat with his arms folded across his chest.

Theo did not vote, but instead became irritated. "This is ridiculous! How can you vote guilty before the trial has started, before we know what the witnesses will say, before anything happens? We've talked about the presumption of innocence. In our system, a person charged with a crime is presumed to be innocent until proven guilty. Pete Duffy will walk into the courtroom this morning completely innocent, and will remain innocent until all the witnesses have testified and all the proof is before the jury. The presumption of innocence, remember?"

Mr. Mount stood in a corner and watched Theo at his best. He had seen this before, many times. The kid was a natural on his feet, the star of the Eighth-Grade Debate Team, of which Mr. Mount was the faculty adviser.

Theo pressed on, still pretending to be indignant at his classmates' rush to judgment. "And proof beyond a reasonable doubt, remember? What's the matter with you guys?"

"Guilty!" Woody yelled again, and got some laughs.

Theo knew it was a lost cause. He said, "Okay, okay, can I go now?"

"Sure," Mr. Mount replied. The bell rang loudly and all sixteen boys headed for the door. Theo darted into the hallway and raced to the front office where Miss Gloria, the school's secretary, was on the phone. She liked Theo because his mother had handled her first divorce, and because Theo had once given her some unofficial advice when her brother was caught driving drunk. She handed Theo a yellow release form, signed by Mrs. Gladwell, and he was off. The clock above her desk gave the time as exactly 8:47.

Outside, at the bike rack by the flagpole, Theo unlocked his chain, wrapped it around the handlebars, and sped away. If he obeyed the rules of the road and stayed on the streets, he would arrive in front of the courthouse in fifteen minutes. But, if he took the usual shortcuts, and raced through an alley or two, and cut across a backyard here and another one there, and ran at least two STOP signs, Theo could make it in about ten minutes. On this day, he did not have time to spare. He knew the courtroom was already packed. He would be lucky to get a seat.

He flew through an alley, got airborne twice, then darted through the backyard of a man he knew, a unpleasant man, a man who wore a uniform and tried to act as though he were a real officer of the law when in fact he was little more than a part-time security guard. His name was Buck Boland, (or Buck Baloney, as some people whispered behind his back), and Theo saw him occasionally hanging around the courthouse. As Theo flew across Mr. Boland's backyard, he heard a loud, angry voice. "Get outta

here, kid!” Theo turned to his left just in time to see Mr. Boland throw a rock in his direction. The rock landed very close by, and Theo pedaled even harder.

That was close, he thought. Perhaps he should find another route.

Nine minutes after leaving the school, Theo wheeled to a stop in front of the Stratten County Courthouse, quickly chained his bike to the rack, and sprinted inside, up the grand staircase and to the massive front doors of Judge Gantry’s courtroom. There was a crowd at the door—spectators in a line trying to get in, and TV cameras with their bright lights, and several grim-faced deputies trying to keep order. Theo’s least favorite deputy in all of Strattenburg was an old grouchy man named Gossett, and, as luck would have it, Gossett saw Theo trying to ease his way through the crowd.

“Where do you think you’re going, Theo?” Gossett growled.

It should be obvious where I’m going, Theo thought quickly to himself. Where else would I be going at this moment, at the beginning of the biggest murder trial in the history of our county? But being a wise guy would not help matters.

Theo whipped out his release from school and said, sweetly, “I have permission from my principal to watch the trial, sir.” Gossett snatched the release and glared at it as if he might have to shoot Theo if his paperwork didn’t measure up. Theo thought about saying, “If you need some help, I’ll read it for you,” but, again, bit his tongue.

Gossett said, “This is from school. This is not a pass to get inside. Do you have permission from Judge Gantry?”

“Yes, sir,” Theo said.

“Let me see it.”

“It’s not in writing. Judge Gantry gave me verbal permission to watch the trial.”

Gossett frowned even harder, shook his head with great authority, and said, “Sorry, Theo. The courtroom is packed. There are no more seats. We’re turning people away.”

Theo took his release and tried to appear as if he might burst into tears. He backtracked, turned around, and headed down the long hallway. When Gossett could no longer see him, he ducked through a narrow door and bounced down a utility staircase, one used only by the janitors and service technicians. On the first floor, he eased along a dark, cramped corridor that ran under the main courtroom above, then stepped nonchalantly into a break room where the courthouse employees gathered for coffee, doughnuts, and gossip.

“Well, hello, Theo,” said lovely Jenny, by far Theo’s favorite clerk in the entire courthouse.

“Hello, Jenny,” he said with a smile as he kept walking across the small room. He disappeared into a utility closet, came out the other side onto a landing which led to another hidden staircase. In decades past, this had been used to haul convicts from the jail to the main courtroom to face the wrath of the judges, but now it was seldom used. The old courthouse was a maze of cramped passageways and narrow staircases, and Theo knew every one of them.

He entered the courtroom from a side door next to the jury box. The place was buzzing with the nervous chatter of spectators about to see something dramatic. Uniformed guards milled about, chatting with one another and looking important. There was a crowd at the main door as people were still trying to get in. On the left side of the courtroom, in the third row behind the defense table, Theo saw a familiar face.

It was his uncle, Ike, and he was saving a seat for his favorite (and only) nephew. Theo wiggled and darted down the row and wedged himself into a tight spot next to Ike.

Chapter 2

Ike Boone had once been a lawyer. In fact, he had once been in the same offices as Theo's parents. The three Boones had survived a rocky partnership until Ike ran afoul of the law and got himself into trouble, big trouble. So much trouble that the State Bar Association revoked his license to practice law. Now, he worked as an accountant and tax adviser to several small businesses in Strattenburg. He had no family to speak of and was generally an unhappy old man. He liked to think of himself as a loner, a misfit, a rebel who dressed like an old hippie and wore his long, white hair pulled back into a ponytail. On this day he was wearing typical Ike attire—ancient sandals with no socks, faded jeans, a red T-shirt under a checkered sports coat with frayed sleeves.

“Thanks, Ike,” Theo whispered as he settled into his place.

Ike smiled and said nothing. He was to Theo's right. To Theo's left was an attractive middle-aged woman he had never seen. As Theo looked around, he noticed several lawyers seated among the spectators. His own parents claimed to be far too busy to waste time watching the trial, though Theo knew they were keenly interested in it. His mother was a well-respected divorce lawyer with lots of clients, and his father handled real estate transactions and never went to court. Theo would one day be a great courtroom lawyer, one who stayed away from divorce and real estate. Or, he might be a great judge like his pal Henry Gantry. He couldn't decide, but he had plenty of time. He was only thirteen.

The jury box was empty, and because Theo had watched so many trials he knew that the jurors were not brought into the courtroom until everyone else was settled. There was a large square clock on the wall far above the judge's bench, and at 8:59, the prosecutors appeared from a side door with their usual air of great importance. They were led by Jack Hogan, a veteran who had been hounding criminals in Strattenburg for many years. In the first trial four months earlier, Theo had been greatly impressed with Mr. Hogan's courtroom skills, and for weeks afterward Theo had considered becoming a prosecutor, the man the entire town would turn to when a horrible crime had been committed. Mr. Hogan was surrounded by several of his younger prosecutors and investigators. They made quite a team.

Across the aisle, the defense table was deserted—not a single member of the Pete Duffy trial team was present. Just behind it, though, in the first row, Theo could see Omar Cheepe and his sidekick, Paco, a couple of thugs hired by the defense to investigate things and cause trouble. As the clock ticked and the crowd settled in, it seemed odd, at least to Theo, that only half the lawyers were present and ready to go. Judge Gantry believed in being prompt, and when nothing happened at 9:00 a.m. sharp, the crowd stared at the clock—9:05, then 9:10. Finally, at 9:15, the defense team entered the courtroom and took seats. It was led by Clifford Nance, a well-known trial lawyer, who, at that moment, looked pale and perplexed. He leaned over the bar and huddled with Omar Cheepe and Paco, and it was apparent that something was wrong.

There was no sign of Pete Duffy, who should have been sitting at the defense table next to Clifford Nance.

Omar Cheepe and Paco suddenly left the courtroom.

At 9:20, a bailiff stood and yelled, “All rise for the Court.” As he did so, Judge Henry Gantry entered from behind his bench, his black robe flowing after him. The bailiff went on, “Hear ye, hear

ye, the Criminal Court of the Tenth District is now in session, The Honorable Henry Gantry presiding. Let all who have matters come forth. May God bless this court.”

“Please be seated,” Judge Gantry said, and the crowd, still in the process of rising, suddenly fell back again.

Judge Gantry glared at Clifford Nance and took a deep breath. All eyes followed his, and Mr. Nance looked even paler. Finally, Judge Gantry said, “Mr. Nance, where is the defendant, Peter Duffy?”

Clifford Nance slowly got to his feet. He cleared his throat, and when he finally spoke his rich voice sounded scratchy and defeated. “Your Honor, I do not know. Mr. Duffy was scheduled to be in my office this morning at 7:00 a.m. for a pretrial meeting, but he did not show. He has not called, faxed, e-mailed, or texted me or anyone on my staff. We have called his phone numbers many times but got nothing. We’ve gone to his home, but no one is there. We are, at this moment, searching for him, but it appears as though he has vanished.”

Theo listened in disbelief, as did everyone in the courtroom. A deputy stood and said, “Your Honor, if I may?”

“Proceed,” said Judge Gantry.

“This is the first we’ve heard of this. Had we been notified earlier, we could have begun a search.”

“Well, start looking now,” Judge Gantry said angrily. He was obviously upset at the absence of Peter Duffy. He rapped his gavel and said, “We’ll be in recess for an hour. Please tell the jurors to make themselves comfortable back there.” And with that, Judge Gantry disappeared through a door behind his bench.

For a moment or two the spectators sat in stunned disbelief, as if they might see Pete Duffy walk in any moment now if they simply kept waiting. Then there were whispers and light chatter, then movements as several stood and began milling about. No one left, though, because no one wanted to take the chance of losing a seat. Surely, Pete Duffy would arrive any minute, apologize for being late, blame it on a flat tire or something, and the trial would go on.

Ten minutes passed. Theo watched the lawyers slowly ease toward the center of the courtroom and engage in hushed conversations. Jack Hogan and Clifford Nance huddled as if to compare notes, both men frowning gravely.

“What do you think, Ike?” Theo asked softly.

“Looks like he skipped out.”

“What does this mean?”

“It means a lot of things. Duffy put up some real estate to secure his bond, to guarantee his appearance in court, so that property will be forfeited and he’ll lose it. Of course, if he has indeed skipped out, he’s not too worried about property here because he’ll spend the rest of his life on the run. He’ll be a fugitive, until they catch him.”

“Will they catch him?”

“They usually do. His face will be everywhere—all over the Internet, on Wanted posters in the post office and every police station in the country. It will be difficult to avoid capture, but there have been some famous cases of fugitives who are never caught. They usually get out of the country and go to South America or some place. I’m surprised. I didn’t think Pete Duffy had the guts to make a run for it.”

“Guts?”

“Sure. Think about it, Theo. The guy killed his wife and got lucky when the first trial ended in a mistrial. He knew that would not happen again, so he was looking at a lifetime in prison. Me, I’d rather take my chances on the run. He’s probably buried some money somewhere. Got himself some

new papers, a new name, maybe a pal who's helping. Knowing Duffy, he's probably got some young woman hooked into his scheme. Pretty smart move if you ask me."

Ike made it sound like a real adventure, but Theo wasn't so sure. As the clock approached 10:00 a.m., he gazed at the empty chair where the defendant was supposed to be and found it impossible to believe that Pete Duffy had jumped bond, skipped town, and was now prepared to live the life of a fugitive.

Omar Cheepe and Paco reappeared and huddled with Clifford Nance. From the way they shook their heads, whispered urgently, and exchanged hard looks, it was obvious the situation had not improved. Pete Duffy was nowhere to be found.

A bailiff rounded up the lawyers and herded them into Judge Gantry's chambers for another meeting. Several deputies were telling jokes near the jury box. The noise level was rising as the crowd grew restless and frustrated.

"I'm getting kind of bored, Theo," Ike said. A few others had left the courtroom.

"I might hang around," Theo said. His only other option was to return to school, empty-handed, and suffer through classes. The release from the principal plainly stated that Theo was excused from school until 1:00 p.m., and he did not want to return any sooner, trial or no trial.

"Are you stopping by this afternoon?" Ike asked. It was a Monday, and the Boone family rituals required Theo to stop by Ike's office every Monday afternoon for a visit.

"Sure," Theo said.

Ike smiled and said, "See you then."

After he was gone, Theo weighed the pros and cons of the situation. He was disappointed that the biggest criminal trial in the recent history of Strattenburg had evidently been sidetracked, and that he would not get the chance to watch Jack Hogan and Clifford Nance go toe-to-toe like two gladiators. But, he was also relieved that Bobby Escobar would not be forced to testify and point the finger of guilt at Pete Duffy. Theo had played a big role in bringing Bobby to the attention of Judge Gantry during the first trial, and Theo knew that Duffy's lawyers and his thugs, especially Omar Cheepe and Paco, were keeping an eye on him. Theo preferred not to have the attention.

In fact, as the clock ticked and the crowd waited, Theo decided that the sudden disappearance of Pete Duffy was a good thing, at least for him. Selfishly, he was pleased.

Two men behind Theo were having a disagreement. In low voices, they were arguing over the fact that Duffy had been allowed to post a bond. The first man said: "I'll bet Gantry takes some heat for this. If he had denied bail, Duffy would have been locked up while he waited for his trial, the same as every other defendant charged with murder. No one gets bail in a murder case. Gantry caved in because Duffy has money."

The second man said: "I doubt it. Why not allow a defendant to post bail and get out? He's innocent until proven guilty, right? Why lock up a guy before he's convicted? Murder or otherwise? You can't punish a guy just because he has money. Duffy's bail was a million dollars. He put up some property and nobody complained, until now, anyway."

Theo tended to side with the second guy. The first one responded: "Until now? That's the whole point. Bail is supposed to secure his appearance in court. Guess what? He's not here. AWOL, flew the coop, over the wall, we'll never see him again because Gantry granted bail."

"They'll find him."

"I'll bet they don't. He's probably in Mexico City right now, getting his face worked on by some plastic surgeons who got rich re-doing the eyes and noses of drug lords. I'll bet they never find Pete Duffy."

“I’ll bet you twenty bucks he’s back here in thirty days, in jail.”

“You got it, twenty bucks.”

There was a rustle of activity and the bailiffs sprang to attention. The lawyers streamed out of Judge Gantry’s chambers and took their places. The spectators scurried for their seats and became silent. “Remain seated,” a bailiff barked. Judge Gantry assumed his position on the bench. He rapped his gavel loudly and said, “Order. Bring in the jury, please.”

It was 11:00 a.m. The jurors filed into the courtroom and took their seats in the jury box. When they were in place, Judge Gantry looked sternly at Clifford Nance and said, “Mr. Nance, where is the defendant?”

Nance rose slowly and replied, “Your Honor, I do not know. We have had no contact with Mr. Duffy since ten thirty last night.”

Judge Gantry looked at Jack Hogan and said, “Mr. Hogan.”

“Your Honor, we have no choice but to move for a mistrial.”

“And I have no choice but to grant one.” Judge Gantry then turned and addressed the jury. “Ladies and gentlemen, it appears as though the defendant, Mr. Peter Duffy, has disappeared. He has been free on bond, awaiting this trial, and, well, he has evidently vanished. The sheriff’s department is conducting a search and the FBI has been notified. Without a defendant, we cannot proceed at this time. I apologize for the inconvenience, and, once again, I thank you for your willingness to serve. You are dismissed.”

One of the jurors slowly raised her hand and asked, “But, Judge, what if they find him this afternoon, or tomorrow?”

Judge Gantry seemed surprised by a question coming from the jury box. “Well, I suppose it depends on how he is found. Let’s say they catch him at a border, trying to sneak out of the country, then he’ll be brought back here to face additional charges. That would certainly affect his strategy at trial, so he would be entitled to a delay. But let’s suppose he’s found somewhere around here and has a valid excuse for not showing up this morning. In that case, I would revoke his bond, or bail, put him in jail, and reschedule the trial as soon as possible.”

This satisfied the juror and Theo as well.

“Court is adjourned,” Judge Gantry said, and pecked his gavel once again.

Theo waited and waited, and finally left when a bailiff was turning off the lights. He had no place to go but school, and he biked in that general direction. Two blocks away from the courthouse, a black Jeep Cherokee eased alongside Theo. Its passenger window came down, and Paco’s swarthy head leaned out. He smiled but said nothing.

Theo braked and they passed. Why would they be following him?

He was rattled and made the quick decision to duck through an alley and cross a backyard. He was half looking over his shoulder when a large man stepped in front of him and grabbed the handlebars of his bike. “Hey, kid!” he growled, now face-to-face with Theo.

It was Buck Baloney, breathing fire and ready for war. “Stay outta my yard, okay?” he growled, still gripping the handlebars.

“Okay, okay, sorry,” Theo said, afraid of getting slapped.

“What’s your name?” Buck hissed.

“Theodore Boone. Let go of my bike.”

Buck was dressed in an ill-fitting and cheap uniform with the words ALL-PRO SECURITY stitched on the sleeves. And, he had a rather large pistol on his belt.

“Stop cutting across my yard, you understand?”

“I got it,” Theo said.

~~Buck let go, and Theo sped away without getting shot. Suddenly, he was excited about returning to school, and to the safety of his classroom.~~

Chapter 3

Theo checked in at the front office and returned his release form. His classmates were in fourth period Chemistry, and Theo wanted to avoid walking in late. Instead, he went to Mr. Mount's tiny office, down the hall from his classroom. The door was open, and, luckily, Mr. Mount was at his desk, eating a sandwich and watching the local news on his laptop.

"Have a seat," Mr. Mount said, and Theo sat in the only other chair in the office.

"So I guess you know," Theo said.

"Oh, yes. It's all over the news." Mr. Mount slid his laptop over a few inches so Theo could have a better look. The sheriff was talking to a gang of reporters. He was saying that there was no sign of Mr. Duffy. They had searched his home and found nothing. Both of his vehicles, a Mercedes sedan and a Ford SUV, were locked and parked in the garage. Evidently Mr. Duffy had played golf, alone, late Sunday afternoon and was seen leaving the course by a caddy. He was in his golf cart and headed in the general direction of his home on the sixth fairway, the same route the caddy had seen him take many times after playing a round. At 10:30 on Sunday night, Pete Duffy spoke by phone to Clifford Nance, and, according to Nance, agreed to meet with his defense team at 7:00 a.m. sharp for a lengthy prep session.

Pete Duffy lived two miles east of town in a fairly new development called Waverly Creek, an upscale residential community designed around three golf courses and meant to offer its residents a lot of privacy. Entry and exit were monitored twenty-four hours a day by guards at gates, with surveillance cameras recording everything. The sheriff was positive Pete Duffy had not left Waverly Creek during the night through one of the gates. "There are some gravel roads leading in and out, and suppose that's where he went," the sheriff speculated. It was obvious the sheriff had little patience with reporters.

He went on to say there was no indication, yet, of how Pete Duffy fled. On foot, bike, scooter, four-wheeler, golf cart—they had not been able to determine that. But, there was no record of Duffy owning a scooter, motorcycle, or other type of vehicle that required registration.

In response to random and thoughtless questions, the sheriff explained that (1) there was no evidence of an accomplice involved in the Duffy escape; (2) there was no suicide note, in the event he jumped from a bridge or some other dramatic stunt; (3) there was no evidence of foul play, as if an intruder, for some unknown reason, wanted to eliminate Duffy the night before he was to stand trial; and (4) so far, they had found no witness who laid eyes on Duffy after the caddy saw him drive away with his golf clubs.

The sheriff finally had enough and excused himself. The news station switched back to the studio, where a couple of anchors launched into a windy summary of what little had just been said by the sheriff.

"So where is he?" Mr. Mount asked, chewing on his sandwich.

"I can't believe he would take off in the middle of the night on foot and through the woods," Theo said. "What's your theory?"

"An accomplice. Duffy is not the outdoor type, not a man who understands the woods and what it takes to survive. I'll bet he slipped away from his house, after midnight when his neighbors were

sound asleep, used a bicycle because he didn't want to make noise, and rode a mile or two down a trail where his accomplice was waiting. They tossed the bike in the trunk of the car, or the back of a pickup, and away they went. He wasn't due in court until 9:00 a.m., so they had a head start of seven or eight hours."

"You're really into this, aren't you?" Theo asked, amused.

"Sure. And you're not?"

"Of course, but I haven't given it as much thought as you. Where is he right now?"

"Far away. The cops have no idea what kind of vehicle they're driving, so they're home free until more clues pop up. He could be anywhere."

"You think they'll catch him?"

"Something tells me they will not. This might be the perfect escape, especially if he has an accomplice."

Mr. Mount was in his midthirties and, at least in Theo's opinion, was by far the coolest teacher at the school. His father was a judge and his older brother was a lawyer. He sponsored the Eighth-Grade Debate Team. Theo was his star, and so the two had developed a close friendship. As they watched the news on the laptop, both minds were spinning wild scenarios about what had happened to Pete Duffy. How had he really managed to disappear?

"I guess we'll discuss this in Government tomorrow," Theo said.

"Are you kidding? This town will talk of nothing else for the next two days."

The bell rang and Theo was suddenly ready to leave. Lunch was only a twenty-minute break and there was no time to waste. The halls were instantly crowded as five sections of eighth graders hurried from their classrooms, to their lockers, and to the cafeteria.

The Strattenburg Middle School had been modernized a few years earlier, and one of the more popular improvements was the new lockers. They were wide and deep, and made of wood instead of the old noisy metal boxes that had lined the halls for decades. Keys were not needed because each locker had an entry panel similar to the keypad of a phone. Punch in your five- or six-digit secret code and the door clicked open.

Theo's pass code was Judge (58343), in honor of his beloved dog. He pulled open the door, and immediately knew something was wrong. Several things were missing. Theo occasionally suffered asthma attacks, which required him to use an inhaler. He kept one in his pocket at all times, and he kept a three-pack of reserves in his locker. These were gone, as was a blue and red Minnesota Twins cap he kept on a hook in case it rained. Two unused notepads were missing. His books were there, stacked on top of each other. He froze for a moment, staring into the locker to make sure he wasn't dreaming, then glanced around to see if anyone (the thief?) might be watching. No one seemed to be paying attention to him. He shifted his books, poked around, and finally came to the conclusion that his locker had been broken into. He had been robbed!

Small-time thievery happened occasionally. The new lockers, though, with their advanced security system, had virtually eliminated such break-ins. He looked down the hall and up to a spot above a large wall clock. There was an empty bracket where a security camera had once been installed. The camera was gone because the school was in the process of updating its video-monitoring system.

Theo wasn't sure what to do. If he reported the theft, he would spend the next hour or so in the principal's office filling out paperwork. And, worse still, he would have to deal with a hundred nosy questions from his friends and classmates. As he walked to the cafeteria, he decided to wait, to think about it, to try and figure out how someone could learn his code and break in his locker. He could always report it tomorrow.

He paid two dollars for a bowl of spaghetti, a piece of cold bread, and a bottle of water. He sat with

Chase and Woody, and the conversation quickly turned to the Duffy trial and disappearance. As they talked, Theo could not help but survey the cafeteria. It was filled with eighth graders, none of whom was wearing his Twins cap. As far as Theo knew, he was the only Twins fan in Strattenburg.

During Mr. Mount's study hall that afternoon, Theo gave a quick description of what he'd seen in court that morning, then they watched the local news as the Duffy story continued to dominate every conversation in town. Still no sign of the fugitive. An FBI agent was interviewed and asked the community for leads. So far, they had no clues into his disappearance. Much was being made of the one million dollar bond he had posted to remain free on bail, and this led to several stories about his financial situation. A former business partner claimed to know Duffy well, and offered the opinion that he ". . . always kept a lot of cash . . ." stashed away in secret places. This juicy bit of gossip sent the local reporters into a frenzy.

After school, Theo checked his locker again, and things appeared to be fine. Nothing else had been taken. He thought about changing his pass code, but decided to wait. Changing the code was no simple matter because all codes were registered with the principal's office. The school maintained the right to open any locker at any time, for good cause, but this was seldom done. On at least one prior occasion Theo had failed to properly close his locker, and the following day was puzzled to find its door shut, but unlocked. This was not uncommon in the seventh and eighth grades because the closing mechanism required a student to press and hold the `CLOSE` button for a full three seconds. Twelve- and thirteen-year-olds can get in a hurry, or get distracted, and fail to hold the button long enough.

By the time Theo left the building and walked to his bike, he had convinced himself that his locker had been vandalized, but not broken into. He vowed to be more vigilant.

Theo soon had another problem. He unchained his bike, wrapped the chain around his handlebars as always, and pushed off. Instantly, he realized his front tire was flat. He got off his bike, examined the tire, and found a small gash where someone had punctured the sidewall.

Theo was in the midst of an unlucky run with his bike tires. In the previous three months, he had collected two nails, a piece of glass from a soft drink bottle, a jagged piece of metal, and he had punctured two front tires on account of reckless riding. His father was not happy with this and when the subject of the cost of bike tires came up over dinner, things were tense.

This latest puncture, though, was no accident. Someone had deliberately stuck a sharp object into his tire.

He waited until his friends rode away, then began the humiliating journey downtown, pushing his bike along streets that now seemed much longer, wondering who would do such a thing to him, and trying to put this latest act of vandalism in the context of a day that had not gone well. The excitement of the trial had vanished; Omar Cheepe and Paco had followed him as he rode to school; Buck Balone had almost hit him with a rock and then caught him the second time he dashed through his backyard; someone had vandalized his locker; and now this—a slashed bike tire that would cut deeply into his savings account.

Theo couldn't help but take an occasional glance over his shoulder, certain that eyes were watching.

Gil's bike shop was downtown, three blocks from the courthouse, on a narrow street lined with small mom-and-pop stores. There was a cleaners, a shoe shop, photo lab, bakery, a knife sharpener that owed Ike money for tax services, and a couple of delis. Theo took pride in knowing every owner. Gil was one of his favorites—a short, round man with an awesome belly that was always partially hidden by a thick work apron covered in dirt and grime. Gil sold bikes and he loved to repair them. His shop was jam-packed with models of every size and color, with the smaller ones hanging from large hooks in the ceiling and the fancier mountain bikes lined up in the front windows.

Theo rolled his through the front door, thoroughly defeated by the day. Gil was sitting on a stool by

the back counter, drinking coffee. “Well, well,” he said. “Look who’s back.”

“Hey, Gil,” Theo said. “Another flat tire.”

“What happened?” Gil asked as he rolled himself off the stool and waddled over.

“Looks like sabotage.”

Gil lifted the handlebars, spun the front tire until he found the hole in it, and exhaled a soft whistle.

“You make somebody mad?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Small penknife, I’d say. Certainly no accident. Can’t do anything with it. Theo, you gotta have a new one.”

“I was afraid of that. How much?”

“You should know the price better than me. Eighteen bucks. You want me to send the bill to your dad?”

“No, he’s fed up with me and my bike tires. I’ll pay for this one, but I can’t swing eighteen dollars today.”

“How much can you pay now?”

“I can give you ten tomorrow, and the rest in a couple of weeks. You have my word, Gil. I’ll even sign a promissory note.”

“I thought you were a lawyer, Theo.”

“Sort of.”

“Well, then, you need to do some more research. A person has to be eighteen years old before he can enter into a valid contract, including a promissory note.”

“Sure, sure, I know that.”

“Let’s just do an old-fashioned handshake deal. Ten bucks tomorrow, and the other eight bucks in two weeks.” Gil extended his dirty and chubby right hand, and Theo shook it.

Fifteen minutes later he was flying down Park Street, happy to be so mobile again, but still wondering if the day could get any worse. He was also debating about how much of his bad luck should be reported to his parents. The farther he got away from his vandalized locker, the less important it seemed. Theo could live with those losses, irritating as they were. The slashed tire was another story because it involved a weapon.

As he approached the law offices of Boone & Boone, Theo suddenly had a frightening thought. What if the same person had robbed his locker, then slashed his tire as well?

Chapter 4

Boone & Boone was a small law firm on a street full of other lawyers, accountants, and architects. All of the buildings along that section of Park Street had once been homes, long before Theo was born.

He carried his bike up the front steps and leaned it against the wall, near the door, its customary parking place. He glanced around, just to make sure no one was watching him, or his bike. Inside the front door, the reception area was the turf of Elsa Miller, the firm's head secretary and sometimes its boss. She was a spry, hyperactive woman who was old enough to be Theo's grandmother, and she often acted as though she was.

As always, she bounced from her chair behind her desk and assaulted Theo the moment she saw him. There was a fierce hug, a painful yank of the earlobe, a tussling of his hair, but, thankfully, no kissing. Elsa understood that thirteen-year-old boys did not want to be kissed by anyone. During this attack, and Theo considered it nothing less, she was talking nonstop. "Theo! How was your day? Are you hungry? Does that shirt match those pants? Have you finished your homework? Have you heard the news about Pete Duffy jumping off a bridge?"

"Jumping off a bridge?" Theo repeated, taking a step back and freeing himself from her embrace.

"Well, that's just one theory, but, good gosh, there is so much gossip racing around this town right now."

"I was in court this morning when he didn't show," Theo said proudly.

"You were?!"

"Yes."

Elsa retreated as quickly as she had attacked, allowing Judge to come forth and say hello. Judge spent his days easing around the office, checking on everyone, sleeping in various places, and always looking for something to eat. He usually waited for Theo in one of two places—either Theo's chair back in his office, or on a small bed at Elsa's feet, supposedly providing protection for the firm but doing nothing of the sort.

"There are pecan brownies in the kitchen," Elsa said.

"Who made them?" Theo asked. It was a fair question. Elsa's pecan brownies were somewhat edible, if one were starving, but the wedges occasionally brought in by Dorothy, the real estate secretary, were not. They looked like brick mortar and tasted like mud, and not even Judge would give them a sniff.

"I made them, Theo, and they're delicious."

"Yours are perfect," Theo said as he headed down the hall.

"Your mother is in court and your father is across town wrapping up a real estate deal," Elsa said. An important part of her job was to keep track of everybody, especially Mr. and Mrs. Boone, and this was easy because she was in charge of their schedules. But Elsa, at any given moment, could give you the precise whereabouts of Dorothy, and of Vince, the paralegal who worked under Mrs. Boone. Add Judge and Theo to the list, and Elsa knew everyone's appointments, lunch dates, coffee dates, doctor visits, depositions, loan closings, birthdays, vacations, anniversaries, even funerals. She once gave Dorothy a sympathy card after her father's funeral—three years to the day after the old guy was

buried.

According to the Boone master plan for daily living, Theo was expected to (1) arrive at the office each day after school, where he (2) checked in with Elsa and suffered through her rituals, then (3) stopped by his mother's office for a quick hello, then (4) walked upstairs, with Judge close at his heels, where he gave his father a rundown of the day's activities, then, (5) after a quick word with Dorothy, and (6) another one with Vince, he (7) went to his small office in the back of the building and cranked out his homework, which was to be done before dinner. Of course, if he had something else to do, like work on a merit badge or watch his classmates play soccer or basketball, he was excused from the office ritual. He was a kid, an only child, and his parents, strict as they were, understood the realities of raising a well-rounded thirteen-year-old.

Theo closed the door to his tiny office and pulled his laptop from his backpack. He checked the local news for an update on the search for Pete Duffy. There was not a single word about the man jumping off a bridge, and this did not surprise Theo. Elsa was known to exaggerate.

Theo found it difficult to concentrate, but after two hours the homework was complete, for the most part. Elsa was tidying up her desk and preparing to leave. Both Mr. and Mrs. Boone were still busy elsewhere. Theo checked his bike for further damage, and finding none, took off with Judge in hot pursuit.

Ike's office was on the second floor of an old building owned by a Greek couple. The first floor was their small deli, and the office above it was always engulfed in the smell of lamb roasting in onions. To a visitor, it was a heavy shot to the nose, though not altogether unpleasant, but Ike, after many years there, seemed not to notice the aroma.

Ike was at his long, cluttered desk, sipping a bottle of beer, listening to a barely audible Bob Dylan on the stereo, when Theo walked in without knocking and fell into a dusty old chair. "How's my favorite nephew," Ike asked, the same opening question each week. Theo was Ike's only nephew. Ha-ha.

"Great," Theo replied. "Kinda bummed out about the trial."

"Strange, indeed. I've been listening all day and have heard nothing."

Since his dramatic fall from a prominent and well-respected lawyer to a disbarred and eccentric old hippie, Ike had lived on the fringes of the underworld in Strattenburg, and down there he heard plenty. In one poker club, he played cards with retired cops and lawyers. In another, he rubbed elbows with several ex-criminals like himself. Regardless of the raging story, Ike could usually track down a rumor and examine it closely before it made its wider rounds.

"So what's your theory?" Ike asked.

Theo shrugged as if he knew precisely what happened. "It's simple, Ike. Pete Duffy hopped on a bike sometime after midnight, rode it a couple miles down a gravel road, hooked up with his accomplice, tossed his bike in the trunk of a car or the back of a pickup, and away they went." Theo delivered this quick narrative casually, as if he knew exactly how things had happened, and when he finished he offered a silent word of thanks to Mr. Mount.

Ike's eyes narrowed as he absorbed this. His jaw dropped slightly as he thought about it. His forehead wrinkled as he analyzed it. "Where did you hear that?" he asked.

"Hear it? Nowhere. I think it's obvious what happened. How else can you explain it?"

Ike scratched his beard and stared across the table. He was often impressed by the maturity and street savvy of his nephew, but this easy explanation of the Duffy mystery seemed a bit rehearsed. Theo decided to continue: "And I'll bet they don't find him. I'll bet Pete Duffy planned this perfectly

and is now somewhere far away, probably with plenty of cash and a new set of ID papers.”

“Oh really.”

“Sure, Ike. He had an eight-hour head start, and the police have no idea what kind of vehicle he’s in. So, what are they looking for? They don’t know.”

“You want something to drink?” Ike asked as he turned in his swivel chair. There was a small refrigerator under the credenza behind his desk and it was usually well stocked.

“No thanks,” Theo said.

Ike pulled out another bottle of beer, popped the top, and took a sip. Theo knew that he drank too much, which he had learned by listening carefully around the offices at Boone & Boone, and around the courthouse as well. Two or three times he had picked up on comments that suggested Ike Boone struggled with the bottle, and Theo assumed this was true. However, he had never witnessed it. Ike was divorced and far removed from his children and grandchildren. He lived alone, and was, in Theo’s opinion, a sad old man.

“Do you still have a B in Chemistry?” Ike asked.

“Come on, Ike. Do we have to discuss my grades all the time? They get enough attention from my parents. And it’s an A minus, not a B.”

“How are your parents?”

“They’re doing fine. I have a note from my mother reminding me to ask you to join us for dinner tonight at Robilio’s.”

“How nice of her.” Ike waved his hand over the files stacked haphazardly on his desk, then delivered the same, tired old line Theo heard almost daily from his own parents: “I have too much work.”

What a surprise, thought Theo. For reasons he would never understand, the relationship between his parents and Ike was complicated, and there was nothing he could do to simplify things. “It doesn’t take long to eat dinner,” he said.

“Tell Marcella I said thanks.”

“Will do.”

Theo often confided in Ike, and told him things he would not tell his own parents. He considered mentioning how bizarre his day had become after leaving the courtroom that morning, but decided to let it pass. He could always tell Ike later, and seek his advice.

They talked baseball and football, and after half an hour Theo and Judge said good-bye. His bike was right where he had left it, with two tires full of air, and he dashed away with Judge following. He found both of his parents back at the office and went through the routine of briefly describing his day.

Marcella Boone did not enjoy cooking and was often too busy to even attempt it. Woods Boone was a lousy cook, but a fine eater, and since Theo was a toddler the family enjoyed sampling the wonderful ethnic foods of Strattenburg. On Monday, they ate Italian at Robilio’s. Tuesday was soup and a sandwich in a homeless shelter, not exactly fine cuisine. They bounced back Wednesday with Chinese carryout from one of three restaurants they liked. On Thursday, Mr. Boone picked up the daily special at a Turkish deli. Friday dinner was always fish at Malouf’s, a rowdy Lebanese bistro. On Saturday, they rotated selections, with each of the three picking their preference without input from the other two. Finally, on Sunday, Mrs. Boone would assume command of her kitchen and try a new recipe for roasted chicken. The results were not always spectacular.

Precisely at 7:00 p.m., the Boone family entered Robilio’s and were led to their favorite table.

Chapter 5

Tuesday morning. And not just any Tuesday, but the first Tuesday of the month, which meant Theo, and about fifty other Boy Scouts from Troop 1440, Old Bluff Council, wore their official scouting shirts and colorful neckerchiefs to school. The school board had decided that the wearing of a full uniform by a Boy Scout on school property would not be tolerated. There was a dress code that was vague, loosely enforced, and always causing trouble, and a full Scout uniform would not violate it. However, the school board was worried that if it allowed Boy Scout and Girl Scout uniforms on campus, even for just one specific day each month, then all types of uniforms might follow. Sports uniforms, karate uniforms, theatrical costumes, even religious garments like Buddhist robes and Muslim burkas. The entire issue had become complicated, and when a compromise was reached, Theo and the other Scouts felt lucky to get a partial uniform one day a month.

He showered quickly, brushed his teeth, which were covered in thick braces and virtually unseen, and put on his official khaki short-sleeved shirt adorned with the required council shoulder patch, blue-and-white troop numerals, patrol emblem, and Life Ranking Award. When the shirt was perfect and tucked into a pair of jeans, he carefully fitted the orange neckerchief around his neck and secured it with the official Scout slide. A full uniform would have allowed Theo to show off his merit badge sash, something he was proud of because he had just been awarded his twenty-second and twenty-third merit badges, for astronomy and golf. If all went according to plan, Theo would attain the rank of Eagle the summer before he entered the ninth grade. His goal, other than becoming an Eagle Scout, was to have at least thirty-five merit badges, all colorfully displayed and sewed on in perfect order by his mother.

Judge, who slept under Theo's bed, had been awake for thirty minutes and was tired of waiting. He was whimpering and wanted to go downstairs, then outside. Theo adjusted his neckerchief again, approved of what he saw in the mirror, grabbed his backpack, and bounced down the stairs.

For the moment, he had forgotten about the Pete Duffy disappearance.

His mother, who was not an early morning go-getter, was sipping coffee at the kitchen table and reading the newspaper. "Good morning, Theo. Aren't you cute?"

"Good morning," Theo said as he kissed his mother on the forehead. He hated the word "cute" when she used it to describe him. He opened the door and Judge disappeared outside. Before his chair was the usual—a box of cereal, a carton of milk, a bowl, a spoon, and a glass of orange juice.

"No sign of Pete Duffy," his mother said, her nose still stuck in the paper.

"They're not going to find him," Theo said, repeating what he had said numerous times over dinner.

"I'm not so sure about that. It's hard to run away from the FBI these days, with all the technology they have." Theo had heard this, too, over dinner. He fixed his bowl of cereal, then opened the door again so Judge could race in. Judge did not waste time in the mornings when breakfast was being served. Theo poured cereal and milk into the dog bowl, and Judge attacked it.

Without taking her eyes off the newspaper, Mrs. Boone said, "So you have scouting this afternoon, huh?"

No, Mom, it's Halloween.

No, Mom, all of my other shirts are dirty.

No, Mom, this is an attempt to confuse you so that you'll only think it's the first Tuesday of the month, then maybe you'll show up in the wrong courtroom.

Oh, all the things he wanted to say, but Theo, being a good Scout and respecting authority, and also being a good son and not wanting to anger his mother with a smart remark, said, "Sure."

"When is the next camping trip?" she asked, slowly turning a page.

"A week from Friday, at Lake Marlo." Troop 1440 spent at least one weekend per month in the woods, and the camping trips were Theo's favorite adventures.

There was at least one clock in every room of the Boone home, a clear sign of organized people. The one in the kitchen gave the time at 7:55, and Theo finished breakfast every day at 8:00 a.m. When Judge slurped his last bit of breakfast, Theo rinsed both bowls in the sink, returned the milk and orange juice to the refrigerator, then raced up the stairs where he stomped around his room a few times to make some noise. Without brushing his teeth for a second time, he sprinted back to the kitchen where he pecked his mother on the cheek and said, "I'm off to school."

"Lunch money?" she asked.

"Always."

"Is your homework done?"

"It's perfect, Mom. I'll see you after school."

"Be careful, Teddy, and remember to smile."

"I'm smiling, Mom."

"Love you, Teddy."

Over his shoulder he said, "Love you, Mom."

Outside, he rubbed Judge's head and said good-bye. Racing away, he repeated the word "Teddy," a bothersome little family nickname that he despised. "Cute little Teddy," he mumbled to himself. He waved at Mr. Nunnery, a neighbor who would spend his entire day sitting on his porch.

As Theo sped through Strattenburg, he remembered yesterday's incident in Buck Baloney's backyard, and decided to stay on the streets and obey the rules of the road. He also thought about the Duffy trial, and all the excitement he would miss because the defendant had chosen to become a fugitive. Theo thought about a lot of things as he dashed along the sleepy streets of Strattenburg. His locker—he was anxious to see if it had been violated. His slashed tire—could it possibly happen again? Omar Cheepe and Paco—might they still be watching him?

Homerom was buzzing with the latest Duffy gossip. All sixteen boys were brimming with opinions and scenarios they had picked up over the dinner table and heard their parents debating. One report had a possible sighting not far away by a rural mail carrier; another had Pete Duffy murdered by drug lords; yet another had him safe and untouchable in Argentina. Theo listened to the chatter but did not participate. He was just happy he had found his locker secure.

The bell rang and the boys filed out of the room and drifted to the hallway, another dreary day of classes underway.

Troop 1440 met in the basement of a building owned by the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars). Upstairs, the older soldiers gathered each afternoon for pinochle, cribbage, and beer, and on the first and third Tuesdays the Boy Scouts met below for their official meetings.

The scoutmaster was a former Marine who preferred to be called Major Ludwig, or simply Major for short. (And occasionally "Wiggie" behind his back, but only when it was absolutely certain that he was far away.) Major Ludwig was about sixty years old and ran Troop 1440 as if he were preparing a bunch of Marines for an invasion. He was a serious runner, claimed to do five hundred sit-ups and

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