



#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

JOHN
GRISHAM

THEODORE

the activist

BOONE

Theodore Boone: Kid Lawyer

Theodore Boone: The Abduction

Theodore Boone: The Accused

JOHN GRISHAM

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

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Chapter 1

The opponent was the team from Central, the “other” school in town and the great rival of Strattenburg Middle School. Whenever there was a game or a match or contest of any sort against Central, the tensions were higher, the crowds were bigger, and things just seemed more important. This was true even for a debate. One month earlier, the SMS Eighth-Grade Debate Team had won at Central in a packed auditorium, and when the decision was announced by the judges the crowd was not happy. There were a few boos, though these were quickly hushed. Good behavior and sportsmanship were expected, regardless of the contest.

Strattenburg’s captain was Theodore Boone, who was also the anchor, the closer, the go-to guy when the pressure was on. Theo and his team had never lost, though they were not quite undefeated. Two months earlier, they had tied with the SMS girls’ team after a rowdy debate on the issue of raising the driving age from sixteen to eighteen.

But Theo wasn’t thinking about other debates at the moment. He was onstage, seated at a folding table. Aaron on one side and Joey on the other, all three young men in coats and ties and looking quite snappy, and all three staring across the stage at the team from Central. Mr. Mount, Theo’s adviser, friend, and debate coach, was speaking into a microphone and saying, “And now, the final statement by Strattenburg, from Theodore Boone.”

Theo glanced at the crowd. His father was sitting in the front row. His mother, a busy divorce lawyer, was tied up in court and upset that she was missing her only child in action. Behind Mr. Boone was a row of girls, including April Finnemore, one of Theo’s closest friends, and Hallie Kershaw, the most popular girl in the entire eighth grade. Grouped behind the girls were a bunch of teachers: Madame Monique, from Cameroon, who taught Spanish and was Theo’s second favorite, after Mr. Mount, of course; and Mrs. Garman, who taught Geometry; and Mrs. Everly, who taught English. Even Mrs. Gladwell, the principal, was there. All in all a nice crowd, for a debate anyway. For a basketball or football game, there would have been twice as many spectators, but then those teams had more than three contestants per side, and, frankly, were more exciting to watch.

Theo tried not to consider these things, though it was difficult. An asthma condition prohibited him from participating in organized sports, so this was his chance to compete before spectators. He loved the fact that most of his classmates were terrified of speaking in public, while he enjoyed the challenge. Justin could dribble a basketball between his legs and hit three-pointers all day long, but when called on in class he was as timid as a four-year-old. Brian was the fastest thirteen-year-old swimmer in Strattenburg, and he enjoyed the confident swagger of a great athlete, but put him in front of a crowd and he wilted.

Not Theo. Theo spent little time in the bleachers cheering for the other kids; instead, he hung around courtrooms and watched lawyers battle before juries and judges. He would be a great lawyer

one day, and though he was only thirteen, he had already learned the valuable lesson that speaking in public was important to success. It wasn't easy. In fact, as Theo stood and walked business-like to the podium, he felt his stomach flip and his heart race. He had read stories of great athletes and their pregame routines, and how many of them were so tense and edgy they would actually vomit. Theo did not feel sick to his stomach, but he felt the fear, the unease. A veteran trial lawyer had once told him, "If you're not nervous, son, then something is wrong."

Theo was certainly nervous, but he knew from experience it was only temporary. Once the game started, the butterflies disappeared. He touched the microphone, looked at the moderator, and said, "Thank you, Mr. Mount." He turned to the Central team, cleared his throat, reminded himself once again to speak clearly and slowly, and began, "Now, Mr. Bledsoe makes some valid points, especially when he argues that someone who breaks the law should not benefit from it. And that many American students who were born here and whose parents were born here cannot afford college. These arguments cannot be ignored."

Theo took a breath, then turned his attention to the spectators, though he avoided eye contact. He had learned a few tricks during his career in debate, and one of the most important was to ignore the faces in the crowd. They could be distracting. They could make you lose your train of thought. Instead, Theo looked at objects when he spoke—an empty seat on the right side, a clock in the back of the room, a window on the left side—and as he spoke he continually shifted his gaze from one to the other. This gave the clear impression that Theo was tuned in to the crowd, looking earnestly, communicating. It made him seem comfortable at the podium, something the judges always liked.

He continued: "However, children of undocumented workers—we used to call them illegal immigrants—have no choice where they are born, nor can they choose where they live. Their parents made the decision to enter, illegally, the United States, and they did so primarily because they were hungry and looking for a job. It's not fair to punish the children for what their parents did. We have students in this school, and at Central, and at every school in this district, who are not supposed to be here because their parents broke the law. But, we admit them, accept them, and our system educates them. In many cases, they are our friends."

The issue was red-hot. There was a noisy movement sweeping across the state to prohibit the children of undocumented workers from enrolling in public colleges. Those who supported the ban argued that the large number of "illegals" would (1) swamp the university system; and (2) squeeze out American students who might otherwise barely qualify for college; and (3) consume millions in tax dollars paid in by real US citizens. The Central team had done a good job making these points so far in the debate.

Theo went on, "The law requires this school system, and every school system in this state, to accept and educate all students, regardless of where they come from. If the state has to pay for the first twelve years, why then should the state be allowed to slam the doors when these students are ready for college?"

Theo had some notes scribbled on a sheet of paper in front of him on the podium, but he refused to look down. Judges loved debaters who spoke without looking down, and Theo knew he was earning points. All three of the boys from Central had relied on their notes.

He raised a finger and said, "First, it's a question of fairness. All of us have been told by our parents that they expect us to go to college. It's part of the American dream. It seems unfair, then, to pass a law that will prohibit many of our students, and many of our friends, from being admitted to college." He raised another finger. "Second, competition is always good. Mr. Bledsoe takes the position that US citizens should be given priority in college admissions because their parents were here first, even though some of these students are not as qualified as the children of undocumented workers. Shouldn't our colleges admit the best students, period? Across this state, each year there are

about thirty thousand openings for incoming freshmen. Why should anyone get special consideration? If our colleges admit the best students, doesn't that make our colleges stronger? Of course it does. No one should be admitted unless he or she deserves it, just as no one should be denied based on where his or her parents were born."

Mr. Mount worked hard to suppress a grin. Theo was on a roll and he knew it. He managed to add just a trace of anger to his voice, nothing too dramatic, but the right touch that conveyed the message—*This is so obvious, how can anyone argue with me?* Mr. Mount had seen this before. Theo was moving in for the kill.

The third finger was thrust into the air as Theo said, "The final point is this . . ." He paused and took a breath and looked around the auditorium as though his final point, whatever it might be, was going to be so true and so clear that no one in the room could have any doubt. "There are many studies proving that people with college degrees have more opportunities, better jobs, and higher salaries than people without college degrees. It's a head start to a better life. And higher salaries mean higher tax revenues, which leads to better schools and better colleges. People who are denied the chance to go to college are more likely to become unemployed, and that leads to all sorts of problems."

Theo paused again and slowly checked the top button of his jacket. He knew the button was okay but he needed to convey the image of utmost confidence. "In closing, this notion of slamming the doors of our colleges to students whose parents came here illegally is a bad idea. It's been rejected by over twenty states already. That's why the Justice Department in Washington has promised to file a lawsuit in this state if such a law is passed. It is short-sighted, mean-spirited, and simply not fair. This is the land of opportunity, and at one time or another all of our ancestors came here as immigrants. We are a nation of immigrants. Thank you."

Mr. Mount appeared at the edge of the stage as Theo returned to his seat. Mr. Mount smiled and said, "Let's have a nice round of applause for both teams." The audience, which had been warned against expressing support or opposition in any way, offered a warm round of applause.

"Let's take a short break," Mr. Mount said. Theo, Aaron, and Joey quickly stood and walked across the stage, where they shook hands with the Central team. All six boys were relieved the pressure was finally off. Theo nodded to his father, who gave him a thumbs-up. Great job.

Minutes later, the judges announced the winner.

Chapter 2

The necktie and jacket were gone, and Theo was somewhat more comfortable in his usual khakis, though the button-down white-collared shirt was a bit too dressy. Classes were over; the final bell had sounded, and on this Wednesday Theo made his way to the band hall for a little after-school activity. Along the way, several eighth graders congratulated him on another fine performance. Theo smiled and took it all in stride as if it were no big deal, but deep inside he was quite pleased with himself. He was savoring another victory, but doing so without being cocky. “Don’t ever get the bighead,” a veteran trial lawyer had once told him. “Because the next jury can break your heart.” Or, the next debate could be a disaster.

He entered the large band hall and went to a smaller rehearsal room where a few students were unpacking instruments and preparing for a class. April Finnemore was inspecting her violin when Theo approached. “Great job,” she said softly. April rarely spoke loud enough for anyone else to hear. “You were the best.”

“Thanks. And thanks for being there. It was a nice crowd.”

“You’re going to be a great lawyer, Theo.”

“That’s the plan. Not sure where music fits in.”

“Music fits in everywhere,” she said.

“If you say so.” Theo opened a large case and carefully pulled out a cello, one that belonged to the school. April and a few of the other students owned their instruments. Others, like Theo, were still renting because they were not sure if this music thing was going to last. Theo was in the class because April talked him into it, and because his mother loved the idea of her son learning to play an instrument.

Why the cello? Theo wasn’t sure, nor could he remember why he’d chosen the instrument. In fact, he wasn’t sure he’d actually made the decision himself. In a string orchestra there are several violins and violas, a large bass, at least one cello, and usually a piano. The girls seemed to prefer the violins and violas, and Drake Brown grabbed the bulky bass. There was no one to play the cello. Theo knew from the moment he first held it that he would never learn to play it well.

The class was a last-minute addition to the current six-week schedule, and it was billed as a beginners’ class for kids who couldn’t play an instrument. Real beginners, raw beginners, students with little in the way of musical backgrounds and even less in the way of talent. Theo fit in perfectly, as did most of the kids. It was a low-pressure, one-hour class once a week and designed primarily for fun with a little instruction thrown in.

The fun was provided by the teacher, Mr. Sasstrunk, a spry little old man with long gray hair, wide brown eyes, several nervous twitches, and the same faded brown-plaid jacket each week. He claimed to have conducted several orchestras over his long career, and he had been teaching music at Stratten

College for the past decade. He had a great sense of humor and laughed at the kids when they made mistakes, which happened constantly. His job, he said, was simply to introduce them to music, to just “give them a taste of it.” He had no dreams of turning them into real musicians. “Let’s just learn some basics here, kids, do a little practicing, and see where we go,” he said each week. After four sessions the kids were not only enjoying the class, they were actually becoming more serious about their music.

All that was about to change.

Mr. Sasstruck was ten minutes late, and when he entered the rehearsal room he looked tired and worried. His usual smile was gone. He looked at the kids as if he wasn’t sure what to say, then began “I’ve just left the principal’s office, and it looks as though I’ve been fired.”

There were about a dozen students, and they glanced at one another with uncertainty. Mr. Sasstrunk looked as though he might start crying. He continued, “As it has just been explained to me, the city’s schools are being forced to make a series of cutbacks for budget reasons. Seems as though there’s not as much money as they expected, so some of the less important classes and programs are being eliminated, immediately. I’m sorry, kids, but this class has just been canceled. It’s over.”

The students were too stunned to speak. Not only were they upset over losing a class they enjoyed, but they also felt sorry for Mr. Sasstrunk. In one of the earlier sessions, he had joked about saving the small salary the school was paying to finish his CD collection of the works of the greatest composers.

“This doesn’t seem fair,” said Drake Brown. “Why do they start a class if they can’t finish it?”

Mr. Sasstrunk had no answers. He replied, “You’ll have to ask someone else.”

“Don’t you have a contract?” Theo asked, then immediately wished he’d said nothing. Whether or not Mr. Sasstrunk had a contract was none of Theo’s business. However, Theo knew that every teacher in the city school system signed a one-year contract. Mr. Mount had explained it in Government class.

Mr. Sasstrunk managed a grunt and a grin and said, “Sure, but it’s not much of one. It plainly states the school can cancel the class at any time for any valid reason. That’s pretty typical.”

“Not much of a contract,” Theo mumbled.

“No, it’s not. I’m sorry, kids. I guess class is over. I’ve really enjoyed myself here, and I wish you all the best. A few of you have some talent, a few do not, but, as I’ve said, all of you have the ability to learn to play with hard work and practice. Remember, with practice anything is possible. Good luck.” And with that, Mr. Sasstrunk slowly and sadly turned away and walked out of the room.

The door closed quietly, and for a few seconds the students stared at it in silence. Finally, April said, “Do something, Theo. This is not fair.”

Theo was standing. “Let’s go see Mrs. Gladwell. All of us. We’ll take over her office, and we won’t leave until she meets with us.”

“Great idea.”

They followed Theo from the room and marched as a group out of the band hall, across a foyer, outside through a courtyard, into the main building, down a long hallway, and finally into the central lobby where the principal’s office was located near the doors of the school’s front entrance. They marched inside and stopped at the desk of Miss Gloria, the school’s secretary. One of her many jobs was to guard the door that led to Mrs. Gladwell’s inner office. Theo knew Miss Gloria well, and he had once given her advice when her brother got caught driving while drunk.

“Good afternoon,” Miss Gloria said as she peeked over the reading glasses on the tip of her nose. She had been typing away and seemed a bit irritated by the fact that suddenly a dozen angry eighth graders were in front of her desk.

“Hi, Miss Gloria,” Theo said without a smile. “We’d like to see Mrs. Gladwell.”

“What’s the problem?”

So typical of Miss Gloria. Always wanting to know your business before you could discuss your business with Mrs. Gladwell. She had a reputation for being the nosiest person in the school. Theo knew from experience Miss Gloria would find out sooner or later what the kids were up to, so he knew how to play the game.

“We were in Mr. Sasstrunk’s music class,” he explained. “The one that just got axed by the school, and we want to talk to Mrs. Gladwell about it.”

Miss Gloria arched her eyebrows as if this simply wasn’t possible. “She’s busy, in a very important meeting.” As she said this she nodded to the door of Mrs. Gladwell’s office. It was closed, of course, as always. Theo had been in there many times, usually for good meetings but occasionally for something not so pleasant. Just last month he’d been in a fight, his only fight since the third grade and he and Mrs. Gladwell had discussed it behind that closed door.

“We’ll wait,” he said.

“She’s very busy.”

“She’s always busy. Please tell her we’re here.”

“I can’t interrupt.”

“Okay then, we’ll wait.” Theo looked around the large reception room. There were a couple of benches and an assortment of well-used chairs. “In here,” he said, and his classmates immediately took over the benches and chairs. Those who could not find a place simply sat on the floor.

Miss Gloria was known to have grumpy moods, and evidently she was in the middle of one. She did not like the fact that her space had been invaded by a bunch of unhappy students. “Theo,” she said rudely, “I suggest you and your friends wait outside in the front lobby.”

“What’s wrong with waiting in here?” Theo shot back.

“I said to wait out there,” she replied, suddenly angry and raising her voice.

“Who says we can’t wait in the school office?”

Miss Gloria’s face turned red, and she seemed ready to explode. Wisely, she bit her tongue and took a deep breath. She had no right to order the kids out of the reception area, and she knew Theo knew this. She also knew Theo’s mother and father were respected lawyers who did not hesitate to defend their son against adults when the adults were wrong and Theo was right. Mrs. Boone, in particular, could get rather firm when Theo took a stand against unfairness.

“Very well,” she said. “Just keep it quiet. I have work to do.”

“Thank you,” Theo said. And he almost added that they had yet to make a sound, but he let it pass. He’d won this brief little battle; no sense in causing more trouble.

For five minutes they watched Miss Gloria as she tried to appear busy. But it was almost 4:00 p.m., and school had been out for half an hour. The day was quickly winding down. A few minutes later, the door to Mrs. Gladwell’s office opened and two young parents stepped out. They barely glanced at Theo and his gang as they hurried away, obviously not happy about the meeting. Mrs. Gladwell stepped into the reception area, saw the crowd, and said, “Theo, nice job today in the debate.”

“Thank you.”

“What’s going on here?”

“Well, Mrs. Gladwell, this is what’s left of Mr. Sasstrunk’s music class, and we’d like to know why the class has been canceled.”

She sighed and smiled, then patiently said, “Can’t say I’m really surprised. Please step inside.” The students filed into her office, with Theo bringing up the rear. As he closed the door, he couldn’t help but flash a nasty grin at Miss Gloria, who was watching. To her credit, she returned the smile.

Inside, the students all stood in front of Mrs. Gladwell’s desk. There were only three chairs for guests, and no one was bold enough to sit down. Mrs. Gladwell understood this. “Thank you for

stopping by, kids, and I'm very sorry about the music class," she said as she picked up a report of some kind. "This is a memo I received this morning from the main office of the city school administration. It came directly from Mr. Otis McCord, the superintendent, the number one man and my boss. The school board met last night in a special meeting to address the rather urgent budget problems. It seems as though the Strattenburg city school system will receive about a million dollars less than what had been promised from the city, the county, and the state. All three contribute to the school's budget, and for several reasons the funding has been reduced. So, cuts have to be made. Throughout the city, part-time teachers are being laid off. Field trips are being canceled. After-school programs, such as Mr. Sasstrunk's music class, are being cut. And the list goes on and on. It's very unpleasant, but I have no control over it."

Mrs. Gladwell had a wonderful way of making things clear. The kids absorbed every word as it became obvious that there was nothing they could do.

"What happened to the funding?" Theo asked.

"That's a difficult question. Some people blame it on the recession and tough economic times. Tax collections are down, and so there's not as much money to go around. Other people claim the school system wastes too much money, especially at the home office. I really don't know. My job is to follow orders. In addition to this music class, I have to eliminate one janitor, two cafeteria workers, four part-time coaches, as well as six other after-school classes. And, I've just told Mr. Pearce that his seventh-grade science class cannot take the annual trip to the Rustenburg Nuclear Plant."

"That's awful," Susan said. "That's a great trip."

"I know, I know. Mr. Pearce has been doing it for years."

"It doesn't seem fair to give a guy a contract, a promise, then yank it away in the middle of the course," Theo said.

"No, it doesn't seem fair, Theo. But, I'm not in charge of contracts. There's a lawyer in the home office who handles these things."

Several of the students looked at each other as reality settled in.

Mrs. Gladwell said, "I'm very sorry. I wish there was something I could do, but it's out of my hands. I'm sure Mr. McCord and the school board will hear a lot of complaints, and you're free to join in." After a long pause, she said, "Now, if there's nothing else, I have a meeting to attend."

"Thanks for listening, Mrs. Gladwell," Theo said.

"That's my job."

Defeated, the students filed somberly out of the office.

Chapter 3

Since before Theo was born, his parents had worked together in a little law firm called Boone & Boone. Their offices were in a converted old house on a quiet and shady street lined with similar offices, just a few blocks from Main Street and downtown Strattenburg. When the weather was nice, lawyers were often seen walking along the sidewalks of Park Street with their briefcases on the way to and from the courthouse, which was only ten minutes away. And during the noon hour there were packs of lawyers and accountants and architects strolling along, talking and laughing as they headed for lunch. Secretaries and paralegals were often seen scurrying about delivering important papers to other offices or hustling off to the courthouse.

Kids on bikes were not common sights, not on Park Street anyway. But every afternoon during the week at least one—Theo—came flying along.

To his knowledge, Theodore Boone was the only thirteen-year-old in town with his own law office. It wasn't much of an office—just a tiny room at the rear of his parents' building with a door that opened onto a small gravel parking lot used by his parents and the other members of the law firm. Law offices never have enough storage room because lawyers are mentally unable to throw stuff away—and they create an enormous amount of paperwork—and Theo's office had once been used to store old files, along with cleaning supplies. Once he took over and cleared the space, he installed a card table as his desk. In the attic, he found an abandoned swivel chair that he held together with wire and superglue. On one wall there was a poster promoting the Minnesota Twins, his team, and on another wall there was a large cartoonish drawing of Theo that had been given to him on his twelfth birthday by April Finnemore.

On his desk he usually kept notebooks and school supplies, and under it there was usually a dog—Judge. No one would ever know Judge's age or where he came from, except that he came from the dog pound and was once within twenty-four hours of being put to sleep, forever. Theo had rescued him in Animal Court two years earlier, gave him a new name, and took him home, where he slept peacefully through the night under Theo's bed. During the day, Judge roamed quietly through the rooms and offices of Boone & Boone, occasionally napping on a small bed under Elsa's desk near the front door or under the large conference table if the lawyers weren't using it, or hanging out in the small kitchen in hopes someone might drop some food. Judge weighed forty pounds, and though he ate human food he never gained an ounce, according to the vet who saw him every four months. Judge preferred salty foods—chips and crackers and sandwiches with meat—but he rejected almost nothing. When there was a birthday he expected cake. If someone, usually Theo, made a run to Guff's Frozen Yogurt, Judge expected his own scoop, preferably vanilla. And Judge was perhaps the only member of the law firm able to choke down the dreadful oatmeal cookies brought in at least one dark day each month by Dorothy, Mr. Boone's secretary.

About the only food Judge did not like was dog food. He preferred to eat what Theo ate, which was ~~Cheerios for breakfast with whole milk, not skim, then whatever the rest of the family had for dinner, with a few random office snacks thrown in during the day while Theo was at school.~~

Because he was surrounded by lawyers, Judge knew that time was important. Appointments, conferences, court dates, meetings, schedules, and so on. Every member of the firm kept an eye on the clock, and the clock seemed to rule everything. Judge had his own clock, and he knew that on Wednesdays, as on most days, Theo arrived after school around 4:00 p.m. For this reason, Judge parked himself under Elsa's desk promptly at 3:30 and went back to sleep. But it was dog sleep, the kind that's not too deep, more of a light nap with the eyes half open and the ears listening and waiting for the sound of Theo bouncing up the front steps and securing his bike on the front porch.

When Judge heard these sounds, he stood and began to stretch as if he hadn't moved for hours, then waited with great anticipation.

Theo came in the front door with his backpack and said, "Hello Elsa," the same thing he said every day. Elsa jumped up and pinched his cheek and asked him how his day had been. Just okay. She straightened his button-down collar and said, "Your father said you were outstanding during the debate, is that so?"

"I guess," he said. "We won." Judge by now was at Theo's feet, tail wagging, waiting to be rubbed on the head and spoken to.

"You look so cute in a real shirt," she said. Theo was expecting this because he was usually greeted by some comment dealing with his wardrobe. Elsa was older than his parents, but she dressed like a twenty-year-old with strange tastes. She was also like a grandmother to Theo, a very important person in his life.

Theo spoke to his dog and rubbed his head and asked, "Is Mom in?"

"She is and she is expecting you," Elsa gushed. The woman had incredible energy. "And she is very disappointed she missed the debate, Theo."

"No big deal. She does have a job, you know?"

"Yes she does. There are some pecan brownies in the kitchen."

"Who made them?"

"Vince's girlfriend."

Theo nodded his head in approval and walked down the hall to his mother's office. The door was open and she waved him in. He took a seat and Judge plopped down beside him. Mrs. Boone was on the phone, listening. Her high-heel shoes were parked off to the side, which meant she had had a long day in court. Marcella Boone was forty-seven, a little older than the mothers of most of Theo's friends, and she believed women lawyers were still expected to dress at a higher level when they went to court. Office attire was more casual, at least for Mrs. Boone, but court dates meant a sharper outfit and high heels.

Mr. Boone, upstairs, rarely went to court and rarely cared how he looked.

"Congratulations," she said, hanging up. "Your father says you were magnificent. I'm so sorry I wasn't there, Theo."

They talked about the debate for a while, with Theo detailing the good points made by the team from Central and the counterpoints made by his side. After a few minutes, though, his mother detected something else. Theo was often amazed at how his mother could sense something was wrong. Often when he tried to play a joke on her, or fool her with some silly gag, he got nowhere. She could look at his face and know exactly what he was thinking.

"What's the matter, Theo?" she asked.

"Well, you can forget about me and the cello," he said, then told the story of the music class that no longer existed. "It doesn't seem fair," Theo said. "Mr. Sasstrunk was a great teacher. He was

excited about the class, and I think he needed the extra money.”

“That’s awful, Theo.”

“We talked to Mrs. Gladwell, and she explained all the budget cuts that have been ordered from the home office. Coaches, janitors, cafeteria workers. It’s really bad and there’s nothing she can do about it. She said we could complain to the school board, but if the money’s not there, then the money’s not there.”

Mrs. Boone swung her chair around to a small sleek cabinet and began searching for a file. Upstairs, when Mr. Boone searched for a file, he simply began rummaging through the stacks of disorganized papers piled in some unknown order on top of his desk. He also kept stacks of materials under his desk, beside his desk, and it was not unusual to see documents that had simply slid off the piles and onto another spot on the floor. Mrs. Boone’s office was intensely modern and neat, with nothing out of place. Mr. Boone’s was old, creaky, saggy, and a mess. However, as Theo had witnessed many times, Mr. Boone could find a file almost as quickly as his wife.

She swung back around to her desk and looked at some paperwork. “This young woman came in last week for a divorce. Very sad. She’s twenty-four, with one small child and another on the way. She doesn’t work because she’s busy being a mom. Her husband is a rookie policeman here in the city, and there’s only one paycheck. They are barely surviving as a family, and there’s no way they can afford to split. I recommended they see a marriage counselor and get serious about working things out. She called yesterday to inform me that her husband just learned he is being laid off by the city. The mayor has ordered every department to cut their budgets by five percent across the board. We have sixty policemen, so that means three will lose their jobs. My client’s husband is one of them.”

“What’s she going to do?” Theo asked.

“Try and hang on. I don’t know. It’s very sad. She told me it seems like yesterday when she was in high school and dreaming of college and a career. Now she’s terrified and not sure what’s going to happen.”

“Did she go to college?”

“She tried, but her financial aid was cut.”

“All these cuts. What’s going on, Mom?”

“The economy goes up and down, Theo. When times are good, people earn more money and spend more money, and this leads directly to more taxes being paid to the city. More sales taxes, more property taxes, more—”

“I’m not sure I understand property taxes.”

“Okay, it’s very simple. Your father and I own this building. It is known as real property. Land and buildings are real property, whereas cars, boats, motorcycles, and trucks are known as personal property. They get taxed, too, but back to this building. Each year the city places a value on this building. It’s currently valued at four hundred thousand dollars, which is a lot more than we paid for many years ago. After the city determines the value, it applies a tax rate to that value. Last year the tax rate was about one percent, which meant about four thousand dollars in taxes. The same thing happened to our home, but homes have a slightly lower tax rate. Anyway, we paid about two thousand dollars in real property taxes on our home. As for the personal property, we have two automobiles and the taxes were about a thousand dollars. So that’s seven thousand dollars we paid into the city last year.”

“Where does the money go?”

“Schools get the biggest chunk, but our tax dollars also pay for such things as fire and police protection, the hospital, parks and recreation, street maintenance, garbage collection. It’s a long list.”

“Do you have any say in how the money is spent?”

Mrs. Boone smiled and thought for a second. “Maybe a little. Not directly, but we elect the mayor.”

and city councilmen and in theory they're supposed to listen to us. In reality, though, we just pay the money because we have no choice, then hope for the best."

"Do you resent paying the taxes?"

Another smile at another innocent question. "Theo, no one likes to pay taxes, but at the same time we want great schools, lots of well-trained policemen and firemen, beautiful parks, the best health care at our hospitals, and so on."

"I guess seven thousand dollars a year is not that bad."

"Theo, it's seven thousand dollars just to the city. We also pay taxes to the county, the state, and Uncle Sam in Washington. And since the economy is going through a slump, all levels of government are facing budget cuts. It's not just happening here in Strattenburg."

"So things are bad all over?"

"We've seen worse. Again, it's up and down. But it seems more severe when it affects people we know, like Mr. Sasstrunk and this young client of mine. When people we know lose their jobs, then the problem is suddenly more serious."

"Does a bad economy affect good ole Boone and Boone?"

"Oh yes, especially your father's business. When people aren't buying homes and building things the real estate business suffers. But it's not something to worry about, Theo. We've been through this many times."

"It just doesn't seem fair."

"It's not, Theo, but then no one ever said that life is fair." Her phone buzzed with a message from Elsa. "I need to take this call, Theo. I think your father would like to see you."

"Okay, Mom. What's for dinner?"

What a joke. It was Wednesday, and Wednesday always meant Chinese carryout from the Golden Dragon. Mrs. Boone was too busy to spend time in the kitchen.

"I'm thinking of sweet-and-sour shrimp tonight," she said.

"Sounds good to me," Theo said as he and Judge got to their feet and left the office.

Chapter 4

At the last minute, Theo decided against sweet-and-sour shrimp, opting instead for crispy beef. It was one of Judge's favorites. His father got the Chinese takeout, and at precisely 7:00 p.m. the Boones took their places behind their wooden TV trays in the den and prepared to eat. Mr. Boone blessed the food with his standard "thanks-be-to-God," and the meal was on. Judge sat beside Theo's chair, waiting patiently but also ready to eat.

The remote control was in the possession of Mrs. Boone. Months earlier the family had hammered out a truce, then an agreement that rotated use of the remote each Wednesday. When one person had the remote, there could be no complaining from the other two. After a few bites and a few comments about the great debate, Mrs. Boone finally turned on the television and began surfing aimlessly, with no destination in mind. The volume was off. The only sound was Judge scarfing down the crispy beef. If Mr. Boone or Theo had the remote, they would go straight to their favorite show, *Perry Mason* reruns. But Mrs. Boone just surfed along, not really interested in anything. She watched little TV and had always tried to keep Theo away from it.

She finally stopped at a show called *Strattenburg Today*, a badly run news recap of the hot stories in town, if in fact there were any hot stories. Usually there were not. She hit the volume, and suddenly they were looking at the plastic smiling face of their governor. The voice-over from an unseen reporter said: "Governor Waffler was in town today to announce a new plan to finally build the Red Creek Bypass, an eight-mile loop around the city that will cost two hundred million dollars and has been hotly debated for many years. Governor Waffler was joined by local business leaders and elected officials who have been pushing the bypass. He announced that he has directed his transportation secretary to make the bypass a priority and designate enough money to build it." The camera pulled back for a wide shot of the governor talking into a microphone while a crowd of serious men in suits stood behind him.

"I can't believe this," Mrs. Boone said.

"What's a bypass?" Theo asked.

She said, "Well, in this case, it's a road to nowhere that will cost at least two hundred million dollars and allow truckers to save about five minutes as they travel through Strattenburg."

Mr. Boone chimed in, "It's also a badly needed four-lane highway that will reduce the traffic jams on Battle Street."

Mrs. Boone replied, "It's also a boondoggle. Five years ago, a conservative taxpayers group, someone from your side of the street, Woods, labeled it the third-biggest waste of taxpayer money in the entire country."

Mr. Boone replied, "And a Chamber of Commerce study found that the Battle Street congestion is so bad it is choking off growth and development."

Mrs. Boone said, "Two hundred million dollars for five minutes. Unbelievable."

~~Mr. Boone said, "You can't stand in the way of progress."~~

There was a heavy pause, and Theo managed to say, "Sorry I asked."

They listened to the governor for a moment and ate in silence. Then a local state senator took the podium and began bragging about all the wonderful ways the new bypass would make life better in the city and county. He was not very impressive—short, red-faced, chubby, sort of stuffed into a bad suit—and after he thundered on for a few minutes, Mrs. Boone said, "You voted for that clown."

Mr. Boone looked guilty and could not deny the accusation.

"Did you, Dad?" Theo asked, almost in disbelief, as if he wanted to say, "How could anyone vote for a guy like this?"

"I did," his father finally admitted.

At the age of thirteen, Theo Boone had only a passing interest in politics. Much of what he saw on television told him to stay away from it altogether. He knew his mother tended to be more liberal and his father more conservative, but he had heard them insist more than once they were simply "moderates," or somewhere in the middle. After listening to some of their discussions, he had realized there was nothing simple about being a moderate. Thankfully, his parents had the good sense not to argue politics in front of Theo. They rarely argued about anything, at least not in his presence.

Innocently, Theo asked, "Where does the two hundred million dollars come from?"

His father replied, "Mainly from the state, but there is some city and county money involved, too."

Theo asked, "But if the city is cutting budgets right and left, and canceling classes and laying off policemen and janitors, how can the city spend money on this bypass?"

His mother laughed and said, "Bingo."

"The vast majority is state money," Mr. Boone said.

"But I thought the state was cutting budgets, too."

"Bingo," his mother said again, with another laugh.

"Why do you keep saying 'bingo,' Mom?" Theo asked.

"Because, Theo, you're asking all the right questions, and there are no good answers. The bypass would be a waste of money in good times or bad, doesn't matter, but to build it now when the city, county, and state are all out of money is ridiculous."

Being lawyers, neither parent was in the habit of backing down when discussing an issue. However, Theo got the impression his father's support of the bypass was not quite as strong as his mother's opposition. There was another lull in the conversation, then with perfect timing, a spokesman for the Sierra Club appeared on-screen. Mrs. Boone, firmly and proudly in control of the remote, turned up the volume. The man said, "This bypass was a rotten idea ten years ago, and it's an even worse idea now. It crosses Red Creek in two places and will harm the quality of the city's water. It will be built very close to Jackson Elementary School, so there will be twenty-five thousand vehicles a day, many of them big trucks, running right by a playground where four hundred kids are playing. Think of the noise and pollution."

Mrs. Boone increased the volume even more.

The man from the Sierra Club went on, "The environmental impact has not been carefully studied. This project is being rammed through by the politicians who get paid off by the trucking companies."

Next was another politician, and Mrs. Boone quickly muted the television.

"What's the Sierra Club?" Theo asked.

"A bunch of radical tree huggers," his father said.

"It's one of the greatest environmental groups in the world," his mother said.

“Okay,” Theo said, and took a bite. Like most kids, Theo actually enjoyed these rare moments when his parents disagreed. He decided to keep the debate going. “I’m confused,” he said. “If the state and city are broke, then where does the two hundred million dollars come from?”

“Ask your father,” Mrs. Boone said quickly, punting the ball across the den with incredible speed and accuracy.

“They borrow it,” Mr. Boone said. “Being broke never stopped the government from spending more money. If they can’t find any money, they simply borrow what they want by floating bonds.”

“Floating bonds?” Theo asked.

“Now you’ve stepped into deep water,” Mrs. Boone said with another laugh.

“Yes, it’s pretty complicated,” Mr. Boone said. “And let’s save it for another day. The important thing to understand, Theo, is that governments do not operate the way they should. Your mom and I work hard. We represent our clients. We earn fees. We spend money on salaries, office equipment, electric bills, things like that. But, we cannot spend more than we earn. It’s that simple. Most families and most businesses do this, or at least they try to. Not so with governments. They all spend too much and borrow too much and waste too much.”

“Don’t they have to pay back the money they borrow?” Theo asked.

“In theory, yes, but it seems like they just keep putting it off on the next generation. Our generation has basically bankrupted the country, and your generation gets to pay for it.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” Mr. Boone stuffed half an egg roll into his mouth so he would be required to chew for a long time and not be able to talk.

Thankfully, the governor was gone and the next story was about a professor at Stratten College who was upset at the low wages being paid to the janitors on campus. He had organized a protest in front of the administration building, but his crowd appeared to be nothing more than a bunch of janitors. The professor had long gray hair and earrings and spoke in a shrill voice.

“Wild Willie Webber,” Mr. Boone said. “What a clown.”

“Who’s he?” Theo asked.

“One of our better local acts. He teaches Russian history at the college and thinks he’s a Communist. Always stirring up trouble, or trying to anyway.”

Of course Mrs. Boone was not about to agree. She said, “He’s actually a very effective activist for a number of causes.”

“What’s an activist?” Theo asked. He refused to allow a new word to fly by without a definition.

Mrs. Boone thought for a second, then said, “An activist is a person who has strong feelings about an issue, or issues, and is willing to get involved to bring about change. Woods?”

Woods nodded and said, “Yep, that’s close enough. I would add that an activist is usually active on several fronts. The same characters keep popping up over and over.”

“I suppose,” she said.

Judge had an eye on one of Mr. Boone’s egg rolls, one of the two remaining ones, but he knew his chances were slim. Instead, he went to the kitchen for a drink of water, then returned to the den, where he situated himself directly in front of Mr. Boone and stared at the egg rolls.

“Get out of the way, Judge,” Mr. Boone said.

“Dad, he loves egg rolls,” Theo said.

“So do I, and I’m not in the mood to share.”

“He shouldn’t be eating Chinese,” Mrs. Boone said. It was something she said at virtually every meal when Theo started dropping food down to Judge. Both Mr. and Mrs. Boone thought it was unwise to feed a dog off the table, and they said so often, but even while they were telling Theo not to feed Judge they knew exactly what he was doing. Mr. Boone himself was known to drop a scrap or two, and

if Mrs. Boone saw it she would always say, “Woods, don’t feed the dog.” But Woods would feed the dog whenever he wanted to, and the next day he would say to Theo, “Theo, don’t feed the dog.”

Strange behavior. Theo was often baffled by the things his parents said and did. For example, every night around 9:00 p.m. when his parents were reading or talking or puttering in the kitchen, Mr. Boone would say, “Woods, it’s your turn to make the coffee.” Every night after dinner, Mr. Boone ground the coffee beans, poured the water, adjusted the dial on the automatic brewer, and got everything ready for the first pot that was automatically brewed at 6:00 each morning. The couple enjoyed waking up to the smell of freshly brewed coffee, though Mrs. Boone actually drank very little. Mr. Boone craved the caffeine, and for this reason he was quite happy to go about his little nightly ritual of “making the coffee.” It was his job, one that he wouldn’t share with anyone. The beans had to be properly measured. The water had to be at a certain level. The filter had to be a certain type. And so on. Nevertheless, every night Mrs. Boone felt the need to remind her husband, and his response was always, “Yes, dear, I’ll get to it in a minute.”

Mrs. Boone refused to take out the garbage. That chore belonged to Mr. Boone, or, more often, Theo. It was no big deal and Theo didn’t mind it at all. But for some reason, and out of a habit that Theo was sure neither of his parents could ever explain, about twice a week he heard his father ask, “Honey, have you taken out the garbage?” To which Mrs. Boone responded every time, “No, I just painted my fingernails.”

Theo had little interest in his mother’s fingernails and how often she painted them, but he was almost certain she got them worked on at a salon every Friday morning. They always looked nice, as far as Theo noticed.

Why did his parents do these odd things? Theo rarely withheld questions, but he had a hunch that some questions were better off left unasked. Perhaps some questions could not be answered. He also suspected married people settled into routines and did things so often they didn’t even realize they were doing them.

As he was pondering these things, his mother asked, “Theo, did you finish your homework?” Again, Theo could count on this question at least twice every night, usually once from his mother and once from his father. They required him to finish his homework each afternoon at the office before he left for home. Theo was a good student and could usually knock out his homework in sixty to ninety minutes, and any leftovers could be cleaned up during study hall the following day.

“Yes ma’am,” he said. “All done.”

“When is the next debate?” she asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“I’m not going to miss it, Theo, I promise.”

“You want to watch today’s debate? I have it on a CD.”

Mrs. Boone smiled and dropped her chopsticks. “Excellent, Theo! Pop it in.”

“Great idea,” said Mr. Boone, anxious to get away from the bypass issue.

Theo removed the CD from his backpack and inserted it in the player. For the next hour, they watched Theo, Joey, and Aaron battle the team from Central and debate the pros and cons of allowing the children of undocumented workers to attend the public colleges of this state. Mrs. Boone could not stop smiling. His parents were so proud. Theo had to admit it was a good performance.

Even Judge was glued to the screen, unable to figure out how Theo could be in two places at the same time.

Chapter 5

Major Ludwig ran Boy Scout Troop 1440 like an elite Marine unit getting ready for battle. He expected his forty or so Scouts to attend both meetings each month and to come prepared, and he expected them to dress in proper uniforms. He led them, pushed them, encouraged them, and occasionally he had to discipline them. But his bark was worse than his bite, and the Major at heart was a soft touch. The boys admired him greatly and did not want to disappoint him. Theo had been a member of the troop for two years and was well on his way to becoming an Eagle Scout. The Major was pushing.

Troop meetings began at precisely 4:00 on the first and third Tuesdays of each month, except when a camping trip was in the works. The Major strongly believed that Boy Scouts belonged in the woods and should spend as much time there as possible. Each month he planned a long weekend trip, leaving as early as possible Friday after school and returning Sunday afternoon. The troop met every Thursday before a camping trip, primarily to finalize details and get last-minute instructions from the Major.

Theo lived for the camping trips. His father was not much of an outdoorsman, and scouting gave Theo the opportunity to camp, hike, fish, learn outdoor skills, and get lost in nature. His parents encouraged scouting because Theo was an only child, and as such, perhaps, needed a bit of help in the sharing department, as well as learning the virtues of teamwork, discipline, and organization.

This weekend the troop was headed to Lake Marlo, their favorite destination. It was a large, man-made lake surrounded by steep hills, two hours away from Strattenburg. The Major was always in search of new camping areas and the troop moved around, but Lake Marlo felt like home. On the Thursday before they were scheduled to leave, Major Ludwig called the troop to order, went through the agenda, then met with his patrol leaders. Troop 1440 currently had five patrols—Panther, Rattlesnake, Ranger, Warthog, and Falcon—and each patrol had seven or eight boys. Theo was the leader of the Falcon Patrol, and it was his responsibility to check the tents, equipment, and gear, and primarily to make sure there was enough food for the weekend. He assigned chores—cooking, cleaning, campfire control, latrine maintenance, firewood, and a dozen others.

The Major reviewed the menus and work assignments and discussed the events planned for the weekend. Precamping meetings were far more exciting than the others, and the boys were ready to go. They were rowdier than usual and had some difficulty following the Major's orders. At 5:30 p.m., he adjourned the meeting and told them to clear out.

Because the Major expected perfect attendance, Theo had never missed a meeting. Neither had a kid named Hardie Quinn, a friend from school who was in another eighth-grade section. After the meeting, Hardie cornered Theo outside where a bunch of bikes were parked at a rack.

"Say, Theo," Hardie said quietly as he looked around to make sure no one else was listening.

“You got a minute?”

“Sure,” Theo said. “What’s up?”

“You know the law pretty well, don’t you?”

“Some of it, sure. My parents are lawyers and they let me hang around the office. I guess I sort of pick up some of the law.”

“That’s what I’ve heard.” Hardie glanced around again as if he had a secret that might be embarrassing. This happened to Theo all the time. A friend at school or a friend of a friend would approach Theo and kick the dirt while finding the right words to describe some legal problem that Theo might be able to analyze and then offer some advice. And Theo was always willing to help, especially for nice kids like Hardie. According to the Major’s plan, the two boys would make Eagle in about a year. Theo currently had twenty-three merit badges. Hardie had twenty-four. Theo was the leader of the Falcon Patrol. Hardie led the Panthers.

“Anyway,” Hardie said, “have you heard about this bypass around the city?”

“Yep. Saw it on the news last night.”

“Well, my grandparents got a notice in the mail yesterday that the state plans to take our farm out by Red Creek so they can run the bypass through it. This is a one-hundred-acre farm that’s been in my family since the 1860s, when one of my great-great-grandfathers bought the land. Now the state says it’s taking it away to build a bypass.”

“Happens all the time,” Theo said. “It’s called the right of eminent domain.”

“The what?”

Two other Scouts walked close to get their bikes. Hardie was suddenly silent. A few seconds later Theo said, “Is that your bike?”

“Yep.”

“Good. Let’s go to my office, where we can talk.”

For ten minutes the boys sped through the quiet and shady streets of Strattenburg until they rolled into the gravel parking lot behind the Boone & Boone building. They entered a small rear door and stepped into Theo’s office. Judge was sleeping under the desk and came to life as soon as he saw the boys. Theo had to pause and properly rub his head. “This is Judge,” he said, and Hardie began rubbing his head too.

“Wait here,” he said, and Hardie took a seat. Since it was almost 6:00 p.m., the offices were quiet. Vince the paralegal and Dorothy the real estate secretary were gone, as was Elsa at the front desk. Mrs. Boone was in her office with the door closed, a clear sign that she was meeting with a client. Mr. Boone’s SUV was not in the parking lot, so he was probably not around.

Theo walked into his favorite spot, the large conference room with walls lined with thick books and a long shiny mahogany table down the middle, with a dozen leather chairs around it. The conference room was used for all sorts of important meetings, and it also doubled as the firm’s library. Theo knew that many of the imposing legal books on the shelves had not been touched in years, but they were still impressive. He fetched Hardie, and they fell into the leather chairs with Judge not far away.

Hardie gawked at the walls and the long table and said, “Wow, Theo, this is pretty cool.”

“This is where I like to work when the lawyers are gone.”

“And your parents don’t mind?” Hardie asked with some uneasiness.

“Not at all. Relax. It’s just a law office.”

“That’s easy for you to say, Theo, but I’ve never been in a law office before. My dad is a minister. And his father was a minister.”

Theo had met Reverend Charles Quinn at a Scout function and thought he was pretty cool. “Relax, Hardie. You may be in a real law office, but I’m not a real lawyer, so I can’t charge anything.”

“That’s good to hear. I wasn’t planning on hiring anybody. I’m just looking for information. I’m sure my parents will talk to a lawyer, and pretty soon. It’s just that we’re scared right now.”

“Here’s the deal,” Theo said, getting down to business. “Eminent domain is an old legal idea that’s been on the books forever. It means the state has the right to take land when it can prove that it needs the land. The state has to pay a fair price to the landowners, but the landowners can’t stop the state from taking their land.”

“That’s outrageous. Who thought up that law?”

“Somebody in England, a long time ago. It’s actually not such a bad law, because if the state can’t take land when it needs to, then nothing would ever be built. Think about it. Highways, bridges, dams, parks, lakes—if one or two landowners said no, then none of these projects could go forward.”

“You don’t understand, Theo. My grandparents are still on this farm. They live in this great old white-frame house where we all gather for the holidays. I’ve spent the night there with my cousins a thousand times. We’ve built tree houses, zip lines, forts, bike jumps, everything you can think of. There is a long front yard where we play tackle football, baseball, Frisbee, golf, soccer, lacrosse, you name it. There are two ponds stocked with more fish than we can ever catch, and we fish there at least once a month. We’ve even ice fished on the front pond in the winter. We play hockey on the pond when it’s cold enough. Near the house is a small barn where my grandfather keeps two ponies, Belle and Daisy, and a horse named Captain. I’ve been riding these guys since I could walk.”

Hardie was leaning forward on his elbows, gesturing wildly with his hands. His voice was rising and shaking, and for a moment Theo thought Hardie might get choked up and start crying. He went on. “There’s a place we call the Campsite. It’s on the banks of Red Creek, in a bend in the river, and every cousin in my family, boys and girls, gets to camp out there on his or her fifth birthday. It’s a family ritual. My dad and my uncles set up camp and all of the older cousins show up, and for two nights we have this big family birthday party. We cook over a wood grill. We tell stories around a campfire, and my uncle Jack can tell ghost stories that will scare you so bad you can’t breathe. My uncle Henry knows every star in the sky, and we’ll lie on our backs for hours looking at the constellations. My first merit badge was Astronomy because I’ve known that stuff all my life.”

Hardie paused to catch his breath, then, slowly, he wiped a tear. “I’m sorry, Theo.”

“It’s okay, Hardie. I understand.”

Hardie bit his lip, then continued: “My father and grandfather wanted us to appreciate nature and to respect the land. They took us hunting and fishing, still do. I killed my first deer when I was eight years old, then I watched my father clean it and save the meat. He made venison sausage and took it to the homeless shelter. We’ve never killed animals just for the sake of sport. We fish the ponds and Red Creek for bass, bream, and crappie, and I could clean and grill them in a skillet over a fire when I was ten years old. This is our land, Theo. No one has the right to take it.”

Yes they do, Theo thought, but let it pass.

“Along the front drive there is a grove of sugar maples, and in the middle of it is a cemetery, a little square with a white picket fence around it. That’s where all the Quinns are buried. Dozens of small tombstones, all lined up in neat rows. My great-grandparents, side by side, and next to their parents. Aunts and uncles. Edward Quinn, who died in the Second World War. Bob and Holly Quinn, great-aunt and uncle, killed in a car wreck in 1985, long before we were born. You can walk through the cemetery and relive the history of my family. Every July the Fourth we have a big cookout on the farm, and just before dinner we all walk down to the cemetery to place flowers on the graves and pay our respects. My dad has a cousin, Daniel Quinn, who’s retired, and his job is to cut the grass and maintain the cemetery. What happens to the graves, Theo, to the cemetery? Surely the state can’t take that part of the property. That’s not right.”

Theo squirmed a bit and said, “I may have to do some research, Hardie, and I’ll probably talk to

my dad because he's a real estate lawyer and knows a lot about eminent domain, but I don't think there is a good answer, or at least the answer you want to hear. If the state takes the property, then it owns it in every way. They'll send in the bulldozers and flatten everything."

"What about the graves, Theo?"

"I'll have to ask my dad."

Hardie sat still for a long time and gazed at the table, his thoughts far away. Finally, he said, "The house goes back a hundred and fifty years. My father has two sisters and two brothers, and since he's the oldest he gets the house when my grandparents are gone. Since I'm also the oldest, I'm supposed to get the house one day. It's the family tradition and it's worked well for a long time. It's a great old house and getting to live there is an honor, but you also have to take care of the farm. And that's a lot of work. What happens to the house, Theo?"

Theo was getting tired of tough questions he couldn't really answer. "I guess I'll have to check with my dad," he said, though he suspected he knew the truth. But Hardie was upset and Theo did not want to make things worse. After the state takes the land, the state can do whatever it pleases.

Hardie continued: "My parents were discussing this bypass last night over dinner."

"Mine too."

"It's being pushed by some trucking companies north and south of Strattenburg. They hate coming through town on Battle Street because they get clogged up in traffic. They think a bypass around town will make it easier to haul freight and do all sorts of wonderful things for their business. They give money to the politicians, including the governor, and so the politicians pull the right strings, and here we are with the state taking away our farm."

"I think my mother would agree with that. Not so sure about my dad."

"And there are also these local business guys who think they can make a buck off the bypass. Think about it. Two hundred million dollars is about to be spent right here in Strattenburg, and so a lot of folks are jumping on board."

"Like who?"

"Like construction companies, bridge builders, equipment salesmen, companies that sell materials. My dad says these guys will go nuts in support of the project. The economy is down, business is slow, and now suddenly there is this huge project. My dad says it's just a typical government pork scam. The politicians go for the votes while the businessmen scramble to make a buck. Meanwhile the taxpayers get stuck with the bill for another bad project."

"What's pork?" Theo asked.

"According to my dad, pork is when government money is given to politicians who use it to build projects in order to get votes in order to stay in office. Sometimes the projects are good, but often they aren't really needed. Pork is a bad word now in politics, but the politicians are still chasing the pork, according to my dad."

"I think my mom would agree with your dad."

"What should we do, Theo?"

"Hire a real lawyer. Eminent domain cases are tried in court before a judge who makes the decision as to how much money the property is worth. You gotta have a lawyer."

"Do you think your mother would take the case?"

"No. She just does divorces."

"What about your father?"

"He doesn't go to court."

"Can you talk to your parents and get the name of a good lawyer?"

"Sure. I'm happy to do that."

Hardie slowly got to his feet, and said, "Thanks, Theo."

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