

John grisham THE SCANDAL (THEODORE BOONE)

Chapter 1

Theodore Boone woke up in a foul mood. In fact, he'd gone to bed in a foul mood, and things had not improved during the night. As a few rays of morning sun lit his room, he stared at the ceiling and tried to think of ways to avoid this entire week. Generally, he enjoyed school—his friends, the teachers, most of the classes, debating—but there were times when he just wanted to stay in bed. This was one of those times, the worst week of the year. Beginning tomorrow, Tuesday, and running through Friday, he and every other eighth grader would be stuck at their desks taking a series of dreadful tests.

Judge knew something was wrong, and at some point had left his spot beside Theo's bed and assumed his spot on top of the covers. Mrs. Boone frowned on the idea of the dog sleeping in Theo's bed, but she was downstairs having her quiet time with the morning newspaper and wouldn't know. Or would she? Occasionally she noticed dog hair on the covers and asked Theo if Judge was sleeping with him. Most of the time Theo said yes, but quickly followed the admission with the question: "What am I supposed to do?" He couldn't watch the dog while he, Theo, was sound asleep. And, to be honest, Theo didn't really want the dog in the bed with him. Judge had the irritating habit of stretching himself out smack in the middle of things and expecting Theo to retreat to the edges, where he often came within inches of crashing to the floor and waking up with a sore head. No, Theo preferred that Judge sleep on his little doggy bed down below.

The truth was, Judge did whatever he wanted to do, and not only in Theo's room but in every room in the house.

On days like today, Theo envied his dog. What a life: no school, no homework, no tests, no pressure. He ate whenever he wanted, napped most of the day at the office, and seemed unconcerned about most things. The Boones took care of his needs, and he did anything he wanted.

Reluctantly, Theo got out of bed, rubbed his dog's head, said good morning, but not with as much enthusiasm as usual, and went to the bathroom. Last week the orthodontist had readjusted his braces, and his jaws still ached. He grinned at himself in the mirror, took stock of the mouthful of metal that he despised, and tried to find hope in the fact that he might get the braces off just in time to start the ninth grade.

He stepped into the shower and thought about the ninth grade. High school. He just wasn't ready for it. He was thirteen and quite content at Strattenburg Middle School, where he liked his teachers, most of them anyway, and was captain of the Debate Team, almost an Eagle Scout and, well, thought of himself as a leader. He was certainly the only kid lawyer in the school, the only kid he knew of who dreamed of being either a big-time trial lawyer or a brilliant young judge. He couldn't make up his mind. In the ninth grade he would be just another lowly freshman at the bottom of the pile. Freshmen got no respect in high school. Middle school was okay because Theo had found his place, a place that would disappear in a few months. High school was all about football, basketball, cheerleaders, driving, dating, band, theatre, large classes,



clothes, shaving, and, well, growing up. He just wasn't ready for it. Most of his friends wanted to hurry along and grow up, but not Theo.

He stepped out of the shower and dried off. Judge was watching him and thinking about nothing but breakfast. Such a lucky dog.

As Theo brushed his teeth, or rather cleaned his braces, he admitted that life was changing. High school was slowly rising on the horizon. One of its most important and unpleasant warning signs was standardized testing, a horrible idea cooked up by some experts far away. Those people had decided that it was important to give the same tests at the same time to every eighth grader in the state so that the folks in charge of Strattenburg Middle School and all the other schools would know how they stacked up. That was one reason for the tests. Another reason, at least in Strattenburg, was to separate the eighth graders into three groups for high school. The smartest would be fast-tracked into an Honors program. The weaker students would be placed on a slower track. And the average kids would be treated normally and allowed to enjoy high school without special treatment.

Yet another reason for the tests was to measure how well the teachers were doing. If a teacher's class did really well, he or she would qualify for a bonus. And if the class did poorly, all kinds of bad things might happen to the teacher. He or she might even be fired.

Needless to say, the entire process of testing, scoring, tracking, and evaluating teachers had become hotly controversial. The students, of course, hated it. Most of the teachers didn't like it. Almost all parents wanted their kids in the Honors classes, and almost all were disappointed. Those with kids on the "slow track" were mad, even embarrassed.

And so the debate raged. Mrs. Boone was firmly opposed to the testing, so, of course, Mr. Boone supported it. The family had talked about testing for weeks, over dinner and in the car, and even while watching television. For a month, the eighth-grade teachers had been preparing the students for the tests. "Teaching to the tests," was the favorite description, which meant no creative teaching was being done and no one was having fun in class.

Theo was already sick of the tests, and they had not even started.

He dressed, grabbed his backpack, and went downstairs, Judge at his heels. He said hello to his mother, who, as always, was curled up on the sofa in her robe, sipping coffee and reading the newspaper. Mr. Boone always left early and joined his friends for coffee and gossip at the same downtown diner.

Theo fixed two bowls of Cheerios and put one on the floor for Judge. They almost always ate in silence, but occasionally Mrs. Boone joined them for a chat. She did this when she suspected something was bothering Theo. Today, she entered the kitchen, poured more coffee, and took a seat across from her son. "What's up today?" she asked.

"More reviewing, more practicing how to take the tests."

"Are you nervous?"

"Not really. I'm just tired already. I don't do well on these tests, so I don't like them."

It was true. Theo was almost a straight-A student, with an occasional B in the sciences, but he had never done well on standardized tests. "What if I don't make the Honors track next year?" he asked.

"Teddy, you're going to excel in high school, college, and law school, if you choose to go there. Don't worry about where they put you in the ninth grade."

"Thanks, Mom." Her words felt good in spite of the fact that she called him "Teddy," a little nickname that, thankfully, only she used, and only when they were alone.

Theo had friends whose parents were turning flips and losing sleep over the tests. If their kids didn't make Honors, the parents were convinced their kids were headed for miserable lives. The whole thing seemed silly to Theo.

She said, "I suppose you know that there is a backlash across the country against these tests. They are becoming very unpopular, and there appears to be widespread cheating."

"How do you cheat on a standardized test?"

"I'm not sure, but I've read about some of the cheating. In one district the teachers changed answers. Hard to believe, isn't it?"

"Why would a teacher do that?"

"Well, in that case, the school was not very good and on probation with the district. Plus, the teachers wanted to qualify for a bonus. None of it makes any sense."

"I think I'm getting sick. Do I look pale?"

"No, Teddy. You look perfectly healthy."

It was eight o'clock, time to move. Theo rinsed both bowls and left them in the sink, same as always. He kissed his mom on the cheek and said, "I'm off."

"Do you have lunch money?" she asked, the same question five days a week.

"Always."

"And your homework is complete?"

"It's perfect, Mom."

"And I'll see you when?"

"I'll stop by the office after school." Theo stopped by the office every day after school, without fail, but Mrs. Boone always asked.

"Be careful," she said. "And remember to smile."

"I'm smiling, Mom."

"Love you, Teddy."

"Love you back."

Theo stepped outside and said good-bye to Judge, who would ride in the car with Mrs. Boone to the office where he would spend his day sleeping and eating and worrying about nothing. Theo jumped on his bike and sped away, once again wishing he could be a dog for the next four days.

Chapter 2

At 8:40 the bell rang and Mr. Mount called his troops to order. Usually, on Mondays, they were fairly rowdy and gabbing nonstop over whatever happened during the weekend. Today, though, they were more subdued. The truth was that everyone in the eighth grade, from the kids to the teachers to the administrators, maybe even the secretaries and janitors, was dreading the week to come.

Woody raised his hand and said, "Say, Mr. Mount, I have an idea. Since I don't want to be on the Honors track, and since I'm far too smart for the slow track, why can't I just take a pass and be normal and skip all these tests?"



Mr. Mount smiled and said, "Because the school says you have to take the tests. It's one way of making sure our school is doing well."

"Our school is in the top ten percent in the state, or at least that's what we're told all the time around here," Woody replied. "Of course we're doing well. We have great teachers, brilliant students, the works."

"Sorry. Look, guys, I'm not crazy about these tests myself, but I'm not making the rules."

Woody was on a roll. "Okay, but just look around the room. We know that Chase and Joey and Aaron and maybe Theo will score high and make Honors. We also know that the slow ones—Justin and Darren and, of course, Edward—will end up in the slow group. Why can't the rest of us just admit that we're normal and skip the tests?"

Amid the hissing, Edward said, "Speak for yourself, you idiot."

"My IQ is much higher than yours," Darren shot from across the room.

"You almost flunked phys ed," Justin yelled from the back.

"Okay, okay," Mr. Mount said, holding up both hands. "That's enough for now."

"I think I'm going to puke," Woody said. "I'm really getting sick."

"Knock it off. First period will be with Ms. Garman to review math. Next will be language arts with Ms. Eberlee, then a fifteen-minute break. I know you guys are excited. Let's go."

They moaned and groaned and trudged out of the room, as if headed for a firing squad.

After three hours of torture, the students were especially happy to gather in the cafeteria for a thirty-minute lunch break. Theo wanted to get away from the boys and happened to see April Finnemore sitting alone. He took his tray of spaghetti and salad and eased into the chair next to her. "Having any fun?" he asked.

"Hello, Theo," she said quietly. They were close friends, nothing romantic or anything like that, though Woody and the others often teased Theo about his weird girlfriend. April was different, not weird. She was serious, often moody, and often misunderstood by her classmates. She dressed more like a boy than a girl, wore her hair very short, and had no interest in fashion and teen gossip and social media and all the other stuff she deemed trivial. She loved art and wanted to be a painter, in Paris or Santa Fe, somewhere far from home because home was not a happy place. Her parents were nuts. Her older brother and sister had already fled. She was often alone and left to fend for herself.

Theo was about the only kid in the eighth grade who tried to understand her. "Are you as bored as I am?" he asked.

"Totally. I can't wait until Friday afternoon and these tests are behind us."

"Are you nervous?" he asked as he shoveled in a load of spaghetti.

"Yes, very. I have to make the Honors track, Theo, because it offers more art programs. I don't care about anything else. The art classes are small, and the best teachers are in Honors." She spoke softly as she pushed some salad around her plate. She had the appetite of a bird. She hadn't touched her roll, and Theo had his eye on it.

"You'll do fine, April. You could make straight A's if you wanted to." She didn't, because neither parent pushed her at home. She was absent more than any other student, and when she was in class she was often unprepared. She made perfect grades in French and Spanish but was uninterested in everything else. Except art.

"How are things at home?" he asked, glancing around. It was a loaded question because the answer could be anything. The Finnemores lived in a rental house in a lesser part of town, and April kept her other friends away from the house. But Theo understood.

"Okay, I guess. About the same. I just stay in my room, do art, and read books."

"I'm glad things are okay."

"Thanks, Theo. You're going to do fine on the tests."

"I don't really care."

"Yes, you do. You're a good student and you're competitive. You want to be at the top of every class, including law school. Don't tell me you don't care."

"Okay, maybe a little. But law school seems like a long way off."

"It is. Let's get through high school first."

"Deal."

A boy named Pete approached them from the other side of the cafeteria and looked as if he wanted to say something. He was an eighth grader from another section, a kid Theo hardly knew. His hands were empty; he had no lunch tray, no brown bag. Slowly, he sat down and glanced nervously at April, then at Theo. "Hi, Pete," Theo said.

"Can I talk to you?" he said timidly, as if April had suddenly vanished.

"Uh, sure. What's up?"

"Can we talk, just the two of us?"

"Just finishing up here," April said as she grabbed her tray and stood. "See you later, Theo."

"Sorry," Pete said after she was gone. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

Well, you sure did a fine job of it, Theo thought, but said nothing. The kid had a bruise on his cheek and looked frightened. "Can we go outside?" he asked.

"Have you eaten?" Theo asked.

He nodded slightly, as if he wasn't sure. "Yes."

Theo stuffed his mouth with as much spaghetti as possible and took his tray to the counter. They stepped outside onto the playground and walked around the edge, far from the other kids. They walked and walked and Pete seemed unable to speak, so Theo finally broke the ice with, "What happened to your cheek?"

"You know all about lawyers and stuff, right?"

"I guess. Both of my parents are lawyers. I've sort of absorbed a lot. What's going on?"

"My dad drinks a lot, does some drugs. He came home late Saturday night drunk, and he and my mom got into a big fight. He smacked her around, busted a lip, there was some blood. I'm the oldest kid, two younger sisters, and I tried to help my mom. He slapped me a few times. My sister Sharon, she's ten, called 911 and the police came. They arrested my dad and took him away. It was terrible, just terrible. He's in jail, and now my mom, and me and my sisters, too, are really afraid of what will happen when he gets out."

Theo listened carefully as they continued walking. "Has this happened before?"

"Yes, but he's never hit me. A few months back, my mom threatened to call the police and he settled down. He said he would kill her if she ever told anyone. But if she tells the police now, then he'll just go to jail and lose his job. We don't have much money, Theo. My mom works two part-time jobs, and, well, I guess we're just in big trouble. What's



my mom supposed to do? Keep it quiet and keep getting beat up until he kills her, or tell the police everything and put him away in jail? We don't know what to do, Theo."

Theo was only thirteen. These questions would stump any adult. "He's still in jail?"

"Yes. He called the house last night from jail and said he would get out today. My mom is scared to death. So am I."

"Does your mom know a lawyer?"

Pete grunted. What a ridiculous question. "We can't afford a lawyer, Theo. That's why I'm talking to you."

"I'm not a lawyer, and I can't give legal advice."

"I know that. But what should we do?"

Theo wasn't sure what to do, but he had to do something. If he did nothing, Pete's mother and maybe Pete himself could be in real danger. Theo said, "My mother will know what to do. She's the best divorce lawyer in town, and she's not afraid of anything. Can you and your mom come to our office this afternoon?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure my mom will do that because if my dad finds out she's talking to a lawyer he might go crazy again. She's trapped, Theo. My mom is trapped and doesn't know where to go or what to do."

Theo stopped and put a hand on Pete's shoulder. "Here's the deal, Pete. I'm not sure what to do and you're not sure what to do, but we're just kids, right? My mother deals with this stuff all the time, and she'll give your mom the best advice possible. She will know exactly what to do. Trust me, and trust her. I'll give you the address of our office, and I'll talk to my mother. I'll meet you there this afternoon, and things will start to get better. I promise."

Pete's lip quivered and his eyes were moist. "Thanks, Theo," he managed to say before his voice choked up.

An hour later, Theo was suffering through a review of basic biology when his mind drifted back to his conversation with Pete. The poor kid was living a nightmare, afraid of getting punched by his brute of a father and afraid for his mother's life. How was a kid like Pete supposed to sit through four days of testing, concentrate on the exams, and score well enough to get properly placed on the right track for high school? And that placement could well determine his future. It made little sense, at least to Theo.

Chapter 3

When the last bell rang, Theo grabbed his backpack and fled the school. He jumped on his bike and raced away. Ten minutes later he slid to a stop in front of Boone & Boone, a two-story office in what was once a family residence on Park Street. He pushed his bike up the front sidewalk and parked it on the porch. He took a deep breath and walked inside, where he was immediately assaulted by Elsa, the law firm's ancient secretary and receptionist. She also considered herself to be Theo's second mother. When she saw him she gushed, "Well, hello, Theo!" and jumped from her chair to grab him. She hugged him tightly, then pushed back, looked at his attire, and said, "Didn't you wear that shirt last Friday?"

"I did not." He found it so irritating to be examined daily by Elsa. He was thirteen; he didn't care what he wore. Why should she?

"How was your day?" she said, pinching a cheek.

"Awful. Just awful. And it only gets worse tomorrow."

"Now, Theo, just think of all the unlucky kids around the world who don't have nice schools and good teachers and healthy lunches. You should always count your blessings and—"

"I know, I know," Theo said, stepping back. He got so tired of these little lectures. "What's in the kitchen?" He was always starving by three o'clock in the afternoon, and there was always something to snack on in the firm's kitchen. Judge finally got up from his bed under Elsa's desk, one of his many resting places throughout the offices, and walked over to say hello. Theo rubbed his head. What a life.

"I think Dorothy brought some brownies," Elsa said.

"Not those little peanut butter things. They taste like cardboard." Not even Judge would touch Dorothy's brownies.

"Now, Theo," Elsa said, already losing interest and eager to get back to work. Elsa was skinny and had no appetite, and she liked to show off her thinness by wearing all manner of tight pants and sweaters. Mrs. Boone said that Elsa wore things that only she could get by with because she was at least seventy years old.

"Is my mother in?" he asked.

"Yes, but she's with a client."

"I need to book an appointment with her."

"Theo, you don't have to make an appointment to see your mother."

"It's not for me, Elsa, but for a friend. I'm not getting a divorce yet."

Elsa glanced at a large calendar in the center of her desk. It was her daily planner, a terribly important sheet of paper because it kept track of everything from meetings with clients and court appointments to vacations and Theo's visits to the orthodontist. "She's free at four thirty."

"Thanks," Theo said. "If a guy named Pete Holland calls, let me talk to him."

Theo bounded up the stairs to the second floor, the domain of his father. As usual, Mr. Boone was sitting behind his large cluttered desk, pipe in his mouth, tie pulled loose, with the look of a man who'd been plowing through paperwork for days. He smiled and said, "Hello, Theo, a good day at school?"

Theo fell into a chair and Judge sat beside him. "Just awful, Dad, terrible. I'm sick of school."

"Well, dropping out is not an option. I suggest you stop the whining and get tough. These tests are important, and you need to do well."

Thanks for nothing, Dad. They talked for a few minutes until the phone rang. Mr. Boone reached for it and said, "Now shove off and go do your homework."

Perhaps the only good thing about the week was that there would be no homework. Theo went downstairs, rummaged through the refrigerator, found nothing but some stale doughnuts, and eventually wandered back to his small office where he killed some time. Bored, he was soon sleepy, so he put his feet on his desk, kicked back in his chair, and was about to doze off when his mother tapped on his door and stepped in.

"Hello, Theo. Elsa said you needed to see me."

"Sure, Mom. There's a kid at school who needs your help."

"What's the problem?"

"It's a long story, but the kid and his mother might be in danger."



"Let's go to my office and talk."

It was almost five p.m. when Pete Holland arrived with his mother and two younger sisters. The little girls were wide-eyed and seemed too frightened to speak. Pete, at thirteen, was trying to be the man of the family, but he, too, was overwhelmed. His mother, Carrie, had a swollen eye and a cut on her upper lip. She looked like she had been crying for hours and began again as soon as Mrs. Boone introduced herself and said she could help. She led Carrie into her office and closed the door. Theo pointed to the conference room and said, "Let's wait in there." Pete and his sisters followed Theo while Elsa hurried to the kitchen. She returned with the same stale doughnuts and some soft drinks. Even Judge seemed concerned and allowed the girls to rub his head.

Pete said, "My dad got out of jail this afternoon and he's looking for us. My mom's really scared and doesn't know what to do."

Sharon, the ten-year-old, finally spoke and said, "Mom says we can't go home." Sally, the seven-year-old, chewed on a doughnut and looked at Theo as if he had two heads.

"What are we going to do?" Sharon asked, as if Theo had all the answers.

Elsa, who had been through similar dramas, said, "Mrs. Boone will know what to do. Right now, let's just have a chat and talk about school. Did you bring your backpacks? Maybe we could do some homework." They shook their heads. No backpacks.

Since it was Monday, Theo called his uncle Ike and said he couldn't make their usual Monday meeting. He promised to stop by later in the week.

Mr. Boone stopped by to say good-bye and quickly realized that perhaps he should hang around for a while. He took off his coat, sat at the table, and began convincing Sally that she should chat with him. In spite of the law firm's efforts to comfort the children, the mood was still awkward, even tense. Their mother was talking to a lawyer, and their lives were unsettled.

After an hour, the door to Mrs. Boone's office opened. She and Mrs. Holland walked out and entered the conference room. Mr. Boone introduced himself properly; Mrs. Holland was too upset to say much. Her eyes were wet, and she dabbed them with a tissue. Mrs. Boone looked at Elsa and Mr. Boone and said, "Mr. Holland posted bond this afternoon and was released from jail around two. He's charged with assault and has a court date next week. He's been calling Mrs. Holland nonstop and leaving some messages that are threatening. It appears as though he's driving around town, searching for his family."

Mrs. Holland interrupted with, "And he's drinking, I can tell."

Mrs. Boone nodded and continued, "I've talked to the police, and they are looking for him. I have advised Mrs. Holland not to go home tonight and she agrees. There is a friend or two the family could possibly stay with, but her husband would probably find them. I've called the shelter and there's no available space, at least not for tonight."

"So we have to hide?" Pete asked.

"We're hiding now," his mother said.

"I just want to go home," Sharon said, and began crying.

"We can't go home," Pete said sharply.

"What's the plan?" Mr. Boone asked.

"I think we should go to our house and have a pizza party," Mrs. Boone replied. "We'll watch television and see what happens."

"Great idea," Mr. Boone said.

"I'll get the pizza," Elsa said, jumping to her feet.

Sally looked at Mr. Boone and managed to smile.

Two hours later, the Boones' den was covered with quilts, pillows, and kids. The pizza was long gone. Sally huddled with her mother on the sofa while Pete, Sharon, Theo, Elsa, and Judge were sprawled about the floor, all watching reruns of Everybody Loves Raymond. Mr. Boone was in his study reading a book, and Mrs. Boone eased from room to room, occasionally talking quietly on the phone in the kitchen. Theo met her there and whispered, "What's going on, Mom?"

She whispered back, "The police have not been able to find Mr. Holland. They can't go home tonight; it's just too dangerous. He's probably drinking, probably drunk by now, and who knows what will happen. They'll have to stay here tonight."

Theo understood and didn't mind protecting the family. "But what about tomorrow?"

"Mrs. Holland's parents live about four hours from here. That might be an option, maybe for a few days. The police will eventually find Mr. Holland and arrest him again for making threats. I'll probably go to court and ask the judge for a protective order. As of now, she says she wants to file for a divorce and get him out of the house, but that might not be so easy. I don't know, Theo, we'll just have to wait and see. Things could change by the hour. The important thing is to keep them safe."

"She's crazy if she doesn't get a divorce."

"It's never that easy, Theo, believe me. A lot of women put up with abuse because they think they have to. They can't afford to live without their husband and his job. I see this all the time."

"I'm not going to be a divorce lawyer."

"Let's talk about that later, okay?"

"Sure, Mom, and thanks for doing this. I feel like I'm responsible."

"You did the right thing, Theo. Lawyers have to get involved in unpleasant cases to help people. Who else could help at this point?"

"The police."

"And they're trying. You guys can sleep in the den and watch TV until late. Let's try and make it fun."

"Does this mean I can skip school tomorrow?"

"It does not."