

**TO CATCH A
CHEAT**

VARIAN JOHNSON

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2 TEST OF WILLS

Jackson Greene placed his pen on his desk, loosened his red tie, then flipped the page on his American history exam. It was only a practice test, but Mrs. Clark had promised that any student who scored above 95 percent would automatically be excused from her brutal end-of-the-semester final. That was supposed to serve as an incentive for students to study over the winter break.

Given the moans, groans, and grunts echoing around the room, Jackson guessed that everyone would be taking the final exam. Including him.

He had just reached question forty-one out of fifty when Becca Simpson, the first period office helper, entered the room and handed Mrs. Clark a note.

“I’m sorry,” the teacher said to Becca after she had switched on a desk lamp to read the message, “but the principal will have to wait until Jackson finishes his exam.” Her eyes locked on to Jackson. “Eyes on your desk, Mr. Greene!”

Jackson sighed and returned to his exam as the office

helper left the room. Of course Dr. Kelsey wanted to see him — Jackson was always his number-one suspect when something went wrong at the school. Still, it would have been nice to go at least one full day after returning from winter break without seeing the principal.

A few minutes later, the timer on the teacher's desk buzzed.

Rob Richards slammed down his pen. "Forty minutes already?" He turned to his best friend, Thom Jordan. "I was sure we had —"

"No talking!" Mrs. Clark said, crossing her arms. "Or do you two need another reminder of my rules?"

"No, ma'am," both Rob and Thom mumbled.

Jackson shook his head. Sneaking a glance at Mrs. Clark was one thing, but *talking* during one of her exams? No way. The rumor was, the last time someone spoke during a test, she ripped the student's paper in half and kicked him out of the room.

Mrs. Clark passed through the rows of students, picking up each test and pen. She locked everything up in her file cabinet and slipped the ring of keys into her pocket.

"The final exam is in less than two weeks. Given the answers I saw as I walked around the room, I'd suggest you start studying *now*." She made her way to the front of the class. "Everyone turn to page eighty-five in the text. Except you, Mr. Greene," she said. "You're wanted in the main office."

Jackson grabbed his book bag and glanced at Hashemi Larijani, who sat a few seats behind him. Hashemi offered him a sympathetic look before turning back to his desk.

Jackson walked down the hallway, his feet making squishing sounds on the still-wet carpet. All the toilets in the school had flooded over the weekend, ruining the carpeting in half of the building. Some kids were calling it an accident, but Jackson knew a prank when he saw one.

Which was why he figured Dr. Kelsey wanted to see him.

Ever since the Election Job — or as Hashemi and the others still called it, the Great Greene Heist — Dr. Kelsey had made it his mission to catch Jackson in the act of another con. But there was nothing for Kelsey to catch. The crew had disbanded. Gang Greene was no more, and the Infamous Jackson Greene had retired.

Allegedly.

Plus, stopping Keith Sinclair from winning a rigged election had been an act performed in the name of justice. Flooding the bathrooms was a whole different type of prank — destructive and stupid. There was no way he'd pull a pointless stunt like that, not when things were going so well between him and Gaby. As Student Council president, she took matters like school vandalism very seriously.

Jackson entered the atrium just as his best friend and Gaby's twin brother, Charlie de la Cruz, exited the main office. "Hey, Charlie," Jackson said. "Did Kelsey call you in about the flooding?"

"Of course," Charlie said, crossing his arms. "Why wouldn't he?"

Jackson frowned. "You almost sound like you *wanted* to be questioned."

“I’m just saying — I could pull that prank just as well as you could.”

“What? Charlie, I never said —”

“Forget it,” Charlie said, walking away. “Better hurry. Don’t want to keep Kelsey waiting.”

Before Jackson could process Charlie’s attitude, the office door swung open. “Mr. Greene,” Dr. Kelsey boomed. “Cut the chatter and get in here. We have a lot to discuss.”

Jackson followed Dr. Kelsey into his office, then covered his nose. Something smelled reminiscent of his father’s liver-and-onion casserole. “I think there’s a dead animal in here,” he said.

“You’re full of jokes, aren’t you, Mr. Greene.” The principal settled behind his desk and nodded toward a pair of brown loafers in the corner. “I ruined those running into the boys’ bathroom. By that point, the toilets had already flooded most of the social studies hallway.” He steepled his fingers. “But enough about my shoes. Tell me, where were you on Saturday evening?”

Jackson sat down on the other side of the desk. “Saturday? Mr. James said the prank happened on Sunday.”

“Mr. James should focus on security, not plumbing,” Dr. Kelsey replied. “No, given the amount of damage, we suspect that the toilets were clogged on Saturday evening, after the boys’ basketball practice. The faucets were turned on as well. So I’ll ask again — where were you on Saturday between five and eight o’clock?”

“At the library. Studying.” Jackson focused on Dr. Kelsey’s nose. He told himself not to blink, not to hesitate. “My dad dropped me off. I checked out books and everything.”

“Did anyone else see you there?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Then you don’t have an alibi.”

“But I just said —”

“Let’s be honest. A boy with your particular talents wouldn’t have any problem sneaking out of a public library unnoticed.” Dr. Kelsey pulled a black messenger bag from his bottom file cabinet. “We found this wedged behind a door. Do you recognize it?”

“I think I saw it at Target,” Jackson said. “Or maybe Walmart. On clearance. You know I’m a sucker for sales.”

“Mr. Greene, I’ve been very lenient with you over the last few months. I would hate to go back to our weekly meetings and random locker searches.”

Jackson glanced at the bag again. The flap was decorated with stickers from *Rights of Warfare: Southern Seas*. “Just because it looks like Charlie’s bag doesn’t mean it’s his.”

“It gets better.” Dr. Kelsey pulled a small notebook from the bag. The letters *JG* were stenciled into its red leather cover. “Recognize this?”

“I’ve never seen that notebook before.”

Dr. Kelsey flipped it open. “Are you sure? It looks a lot like your handwriting.”