

# CHAPTER 1

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This was the one. It had to be. He just knew it.

Theo took a deep breath and carefully reached into his back pocket, fishing around for a tiny screwdriver. It was a nifty little tool—it even folded in on itself, so it didn’t poke Theo when he sat in class. Booker had gifted one to each of them when it all began, penning their names in his boyish scrawl—*Theo. Madi. Nolan.*

It was all for the Jigsaw Project.

Theo took a deep breath and gazed up at the ladder towering above him. It looked much taller than it had from the entrance of the high school auditorium now that he was up close. A few weak lights illuminated the stage beneath his feet, but the auditorium behind him was quiet and dark. Still, Theo swiveled his head left and right, sweeping anxiously for signs of life.

But the drafty auditorium was just as empty as it had been when he sneaked in, the rows and rows of seats behind him folded up tight. This was a one-man show.

He glanced down at his phone—6:31 p.m., it blinked back. It was a Tuesday night. Nobody had a good reason to be in the Midland High School auditorium on a Tuesday night. He was alone. He balled his hands into tight fists, trying to slow his racing heart. *Nobody’s coming*, he promised himself over and over again.

Still, his hands shook as he took the first rung of the ladder.

A loud *creak* from the first step made him freeze, and Theo whipped his head around again, nearly losing his balance. But nothing had changed. The cavernous room was still deserted.

He shook his head and continued upward, rung by tentative rung. *Don't look down*, he repeated the familiar adage to himself, which made him do just that. He nearly gasped when he caught sight of his sneakers dangling at least eight feet above the wooden floor of the stage. That fall would hurt.

He gulped and refocused on his shaky hands, forcing them to reach higher.

He didn't *have* to continue climbing. This was a choice...but then again, was it?

They only had one month left of school, barely any time before the end of the Jigsaw Project. Booker had already stolen a screw from the rock-climbing wall in the gym *and* the teachers-only food court. Just last week, Nolan had bragged about swimming down to the bottom of the pool and loosening a screw from there.

And of course, Madi was sure to come up with something brilliant because that's just who she was.

But Theo hadn't taken any real contenders yet. He'd swiped a couple screws from the lockers, one from a lamppost outside, one from the boys' bathroom in the STEM wing. Every day, he came to school thinking the opportunity for the perfect one would just present itself.

It hadn't—until today. He'd stayed late after school tutoring a friend in trigonometry, and like magic, everything had fallen into place.

The empty auditorium, the late hour, the janitor forgetting a ladder on stage...it was unmistakable. The universe wanted Theo to get this one. And he was going to.

After what felt like years, he finally scaled the ladder, swaying dangerously at the top. Behind him was just air, rows of unfilled seats, the unforgiving wood floor of the auditorium. He knew nobody would hear him if he fell.

But in front of him was the key to the Jigsaw Project.

Was he tall enough to reach it? Theo stretched his arms out hesitantly, tiptoeing on the ladder's edge, until his fingertips just brushed the electric cords hanging from the ceiling.

He was close enough. His heart soared.

Carefully, he lifted the little gift screwdriver above his head. It took three, four, five turns until a long, silver screw tumbled down from a rod in the ceiling and fell into Theo's shaky hand.

*Holy shit*, he breathed, turning it over in his palm. The shiny treasure looked nothing like the rusty screws he'd gotten from the lockers or the boys' bathroom.

This was the one. Theo knew it. If this didn't win, nothing would.

He smiled and slipped the screw into his pocket, taking out a sheet of yellow smiley face stickers in its place, the ones his teachers used to offer for good grades in elementary school. He carefully unpeeled one and stuck it to the hole where he'd taken the screw, the mark they used to prove that the Jigsaw Project really did happen. The yellow sticker sparkled brightly against the black ceiling rods.

Theo pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, thinking about the prize in his pocket and all the things he'd tell Booker. His friend would be so impressed. He'd sneaked into the auditorium after hours, scaled a ladder...all things that were very out of character for Theo.

Patting the treasure in his pocket once more, he made to climb back down when it hit him. What if he lost it? Screws were so small, so easy to misplace. And winning was, as Booker had put it, *a one-way ticket to badassery*.

Without thinking, Theo stretched his arms toward the ceiling again and stole one, then two more of the gleaming screws. He slipped them both into his pocket to join the first. As he began unscrewing a fourth, the rod above him creaked and groaned, wobbling slightly on its hinges.

Theo froze, watching it quiver above his head.

It was time to leave.

He scrambled down the ladder, grabbed his backpack, and scampered toward the exit of the auditorium, peering through a crack in

the doorway to make sure the halls were barren before slipping into the empty school and darting away from the scene of the crime.

He took his first deep breath only once he threw open the doors to Midland High, stepping outside into a cool spring night. The sun dipped behind the high school just as the football stadium lights flickered on, illuminating the girls' lacrosse team as they jogged around the field. A soft breeze ruffled Theo's hair as he made his way toward the parking lot, the three stolen screws clinking softly in his pocket. He smiled.

For the first time since August—the very beginning of their senior year—he felt a Jigsaw Project-sized pressure lift from his chest.

When he finally reached his car, he emptied his pockets to stare again at the three perfect screws. They glimmered in the parking lot lights, winking at Theo as if to whisper, “*You did it.*”

*I did do it*, he thought triumphantly.

He wouldn't bring these ones back to Booker's house and put them in the red bucket where they kept their growing cache of stolen screws. No. He'd keep these in his desk drawer at home, stashing them away for a grand reveal at the end of the year.

Theo brushed his messy hair from his eyes and gently placed the screws in his cupholder, watching them roll around for a moment. These were the ones. He had a very good feeling.

He'd done something big.