

# The Kelsey Job

(Or, the Story Behind the Story of THE GREAT GREENE HEIST)

by VARIAN JOHNSON

While most of Mrs. Dalton's seventh-grade language arts class lined up at the door, Jackson Greene remained at his seat, his forehead resting on a folder on his desk.

Mrs. Dalton tapped his shoulder. "What's wrong, Jackson?"

He looked up at the teacher. "I don't feel so well."

She touched his forehead. He felt feverish. Still, this was Jackson Greene. Nothing he said or did could be trusted.

Jackson coughed, and Mrs. Dalton jerked her hand back. "Maybe you should visit the nurse."

He loosened his tie. "I'm okay," he began, before sniffing and wiping his nose.

"Jackson, the last place you need to be is in the assembly with the rest of the students. There's no telling who else could get sick. Head down to the nurse right now."

Jackson nodded slowly. Then he stood up, grabbed his folder, and trudged out of class toward the office. Every other student in the school was headed in the opposite direction, toward the auditorium. As he passed a trash can, Jackson tipped his folder over the opening, letting the still-warm Insta-Gel heat pack slip into the can.

Someone pushed his shoulder. "Watch where you're going!"

Jackson looked up to see Keith Sinclair scowling in front of him. Two of Keith's lackeys stood a few feet away.

"Strong arm," Jackson said. "Too bad it didn't help your jump shot during the Blitz at the Fitz."

"You cheated in that game," Keith said.

Jackson took a step forward. "Gaby and I are ready anytime you want a rematch."

"Don't worry. Your time is coming. Sooner than you think." Keith walked off, bumping Jackson's shoulder again as he passed.

Jackson waited until the boys had disappeared down the hallway, then made his way to the row of potted plants in the far corner of the atrium. "Sorry for the late notice."

Charlie de la Cruz ran his fingers through his hair as Jackson knelt beside him. "I can't believe you planned a job without me." He paused. "Actually, I can't believe you planned a job with Katie Accord."

"It's not a job. Think of it more as a favor. Or a trade." Jackson pulled out his phone and checked the time. "Did you scope out the main office?"

"Just did. Dr. Kelsey's gone. It's empty except for Ms. Appleton," Charlie said.

"Thanks." Jackson peeked through the leaves of the fern as the door to the Science wing opened. Katie Accord entered the atrium. "Finally," he mumbled. Rookies had no concept of timeliness.



"Why's it so important for her to get her phone back anyway?" Charlie asked.

"She *may* have taken a photo of Mr. Kowalski's English I exam while she was doing some filing in the office." Jackson fiddled with the notepad in his pocket. "She's guessing that wouldn't go over so well with her dad."

"The superintendent? You think?" Charlie glanced at Katie. "You know Keith's going to be ticked off when he finds out you pulled a job with his ex."

Jackson smiled. "A fringe benefit."

"It's not going to give Gaby the warm fuzzies, either."

"Trust me, Charlie. I know what I'm doing. It's all part of my master plan."

"And how long did it take you to develop this 'master plan'?"

Four days—which was nowhere near enough time to piece together a real plan. But Charlie didn't need to know that. "Thanks for the help. I'll catch up with you after school."

Charlie shook his head as he rose to his feet. "Good luck."

Katie crouched down beside Jackson. "Where's he going?"

"This is a two-man operation," he said. With such a crazy last-minute scheme, he didn't want to involve Charlie any more than necessary. "You placed the alarm?"

"Yeah," she said, searching through her purse.

"Underneath the car? Behind the back tire, where she can't see it?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes." Katie stopped talking to apply some lip gloss. It was thick and shiny—nothing like the cherry Chapstick

that Gaby sometimes used.

Jackson preferred the Chapstick.

"Don't be such a worrywart," she continued, rubbing a bit of excess gloss away. "Me and Megan hid it this morning. We—"

"You told Megan Feldman?"

"What? I needed a lookout." She shrugged. "Megan would never tell Keith."

*Yeah, but she might tell a few of the other cheerleaders,* Jackson thought. From there, it was a short trip to the basketball team, and then to Keith.

"Come on," she said, nudging him. "I really need that phone."

Jackson blew out a long stream of air. He had timed Ms. Appleton all week. It took the secretary a little over two minutes to walk to her car. Counting the back and forth, that gave him four minutes inside the office. Plenty of time.

"Okay. Let's do it." He grabbed his phone and swiped through the apps until he came to the car alarm program. He pressed the button.

Katie frowned. "Is it—?"

"Shh." Jackson tapped his ear. "There. You hear it?"

"Barely."

"That's the point," he said. "Too loud and we'd have every teacher in the building going out to check their car."

"So how is she supposed to know to go outside?"

"Easy," Jackson said. "You're going to tell her."

She slung her purse over her shoulder. "You could have told me that ahead of time."

"Well, it is a two-man operation!" He shooed her away. "Hurry up. Those alarm batteries won't last forever."

As Katie crossed the atrium, Jackson pulled a ring of keys from his jacket pocket. He'd created bump keys—made especially for lock-picking—for every type of door handle and dead-bolt at the school. He could get inside the principal's office in twenty seconds without breaking a sweat. As long as they could quickly find Katie's phone in Dr. Kelsey's desk, they'd be in and out before Ms. Appleton made it to her car.

Katie entered the office. A few long seconds later, she and Ms. Appleton came out again. Katie lingered by the main office door and halfheartedly looked through her purse while Ms. Appleton locked the door and then made her way toward the school exit.

As soon as the door swung shut behind her, Jackson sprinted toward the office, the ring of keys tight in one hand, his phone in the other. Two taps of the right key and a little shimmy later, he and Katie were inside.

Jackson grinned as he glanced at his phone. Seven seconds—a personal best. Then he jogged to Dr. Kelsey's office.

He knelt in front of the principal's door. "Hmm."

"What's wrong?" Katie whispered.

"It looks like Dr. Kelsey changed his lock. But I'm sure one of these will work." He picked what he guessed was the correct bump key and slipped it into the keyhole.

Nothing.

He tried key after key, but the result was the same each time.

"What type of lock is this?" Jackson mumbled. He went through the ring again. The door stayed shut.

"So now what?" Katie asked.

"We bail." He glanced at his phone. "We've only got a minute and a half before Ms. Appleton gets back. No way I'm springing this lock by then."

"But what about my phone?"

"Maybe I can try again tomorrow. Or this weekend." He stood and turned toward the main office door. "I just don't know how to—"

Jackson's mouth dropped open. Through the one-way glass, he saw Dr. Kelsey and Keith speeding toward the main office. Keith's minions trailed a few feet behind.

"I can't believe it! Do you think Keith actually squealed on us?" Katie asked.

"You did dump him in the middle of lunch," Jackson said. "In front of all his friends."

"Only after he blamed me for his loss at the Blitz!" she replied. "And *you* were the one who ran up the score."

Jackson shook his head—they didn't have time to argue. He ran to the nearest door, a locked closet. He tried a few keys in the handle, but stopped after the fourth one. Even if he could find somewhere for them both to hide, they wouldn't have any way to sneak back out. And if he got caught with the bump keys . . .

He dashed behind the office counter and flung the keys into the first unlocked drawer he could find. If he was lucky, he could get them back later.

He glanced at the window again and sighed. Dr. Kelsey and Keith were almost at the door. It had taken two years, but it looked like Keith had finally beaten him.

Katie joined him behind the counter. "So now what?" she asked, her lip gloss shimmering in the light.

Jackson blinked. Maybe there was one last way to one-up Keith.

"There's no way we're getting out of this. Kelsey's got us caught." He licked his dry lips and took a step toward her. "But if you're game, we can stick it to your old boyfriend one last time."

She tilted her head. "Are you suggesting . . ."

"We're already in trouble." He leaned into her. "How much worse can it get?"

Then, as Dr. Kelsey opened the door, Jackson Greene kissed Katie Accord.

**What happens next? Find out in**

## **THE GREAT GREENE HEIST**

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