

The New York Times Bestseller

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H O O T

ONE

Roy would not have noticed the strange boy if it weren't for Dana Matherson, because Roy ordinarily didn't look out the window of the school bus. He preferred to read comics and mystery books on the morning ride to Trace Middle.

But on this day, a Monday (Roy would never forget), Dana Matherson grabbed Roy's head from behind and pressed his thumbs into Roy's temple, as if he were squeezing a soccer ball. The older kids were supposed to stay in the back of the bus, but Dana had snuck up behind Roy's seat and ambushed him. When Roy tried to wriggle free, Dana mashed his face against the window.

It was then, squinting through the smudged glass, that Roy spotted the strange boy running along the sidewalk. It appeared as if he was hurrying to catch the school bus, which had stopped at a corner to pick up more kids.

The boy was straw-blond and wiry, and his skin was nut-brown from the sun. The expression on his face was intent and serious. He wore a faded Miami Heat basketball jersey and dirty khaki shorts, and here was the odd part: no shoes. The soles of his bare feet looked as black as barbecue coals.

at the corner of East Oriole and Woodbury, on the eastern edge of town.

Officer Delinko was met by a man in a dark blue pickup truck. The man, who was as bald as a beach ball, introduced himself as Curly. Officer Delinko thought the bald man must have a good sense of humor to go by such a nickname, but he was wrong. Curly was cranky and unsmiling.

"You should see what they done," he said to the policeman.

"Who?"

"Follow me," the man called Curly said.

Officer Delinko got in step behind him. "The dispatcher said you wanted to report some vandalism."

"That's right," Curly grunted over his shoulder.

The policeman couldn't see what there was to be vandalized on the property, which was basically a few acres of scraggly weeds. Curly stopped walking and pointed at a short piece of lumber on the ground. A ribbon of bright pink plastic was tied to one end of the stick. The other end was sharpened and caked with gray dirt.

Curly said, "They pulled 'em out."

"That's a survey stake?" asked Officer Delinko.

"Yep. They yanked 'em out of the ground, every damn one."

"Probably just kids."

"And then they threw 'em every which way," Curly said, waving a beefy arm, "and then they filled in the holes."

"That's a little weird," the policeman remarked. "When did this happen?"

"Last night or early this morning," Curly said. "Maybe it don't look like a big deal, but it's gonna take a while to get the site marked out again. Meantime, we can't start clearin' or gradin' or nuthin'. We got backhoes and dozers already leased, and now they gotta sit. I know it don't look like the crime of the century, but still—"

"I understand," said Officer Delinko. "What's your estimate of the monetary damage?"

"Damage?"

"Yes. So I can put it in my report." The policeman picked up the survey stake and examined it. "It's not really broken, is it?"

"Well, no—"

"Were any of them destroyed?" asked Officer Delinko. "How much does one of these things cost—a buck or two?"

The man called Curly was losing his patience. "They didn't break none of the stakes," he said gruffly.

"Not even one?" The policeman frowned. He was trying to figure out what to put in his report. You can't have vandalism without monetary damages, and if nothing on the property was broken or defaced. . . .

"What I'm tryin' to explain," Curly said irritably, "it's not that they messed up the survey stakes, it's them screwing up our whole construction schedule. That's where it'll cost some serious bucks."

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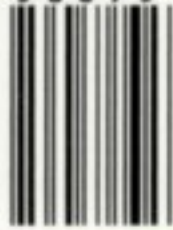
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