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The Cut

Written by George Pelecanos

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THE CUT

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ONE

THEY WERE in a second-story office with a bank of windows overlooking D Street at 5th, in a corner row house close to the federal courts. Tom Petersen, big and blond, sat behind his desk, wearing an untucked paisley shirt, jeans, and boots. Spero Lucas, in Carhartt, was in a hard chair set before the desk. Petersen was a criminal defense attorney, private practice. Lucas, one of his investigators.

A black Moleskine notebook the size of a pocket Bible was open in Lucas's hand. He was scribbling something in the book.

"It's all in the documents I'm going to give you," said Petersen with growing impatience. "You don't need to take notes."

"I'd rather," said Lucas.

"I can't tell if you're listening."

"I'm listening. Where'd they boost the Denali?"

"They took it up in Manor Park, on Peabody Street. Near the community garden, across from the radio towers."

"Behind the police station?"

"Right in back of Four-D."

"Pretty bold," said Lucas. "How many boys?"

"Two. Unfortunately, my client, David Hawkins, was the one behind the wheel."

"You just have him?"

"The other one, Duron Gaskins, he's been assigned a PD."

"Duron," said Lucas.

Petersen shrugged. "Like the paint."

"How'd David get so lucky to score a stud like you?"

"I'm representing his father on another matter," said Petersen.

"So this is like a favor."

"A four-hundred-dollar-an-hour favor."

Lucas's back had begun to stiffen. He shifted his weight in his chair. "Give me some details."

Petersen pushed a manila file across the desk. "Here."

"*Talk* to me."

"What do you want to know?"

"How'd they do it, for starters?"

"Steal the vehicle? That was easy. The boys were walking down the street, supposed to be in school, but hey. It's early in the morning, cold as hell. You remember that snap we had back in February? This woman comes out of her apartment, starts her SUV up, and then leaves it running and goes back into the apartment."

"She forget somethin?"

"She was heating up the Denali before she went to work."

"Insurance companies don't like that."

"She left the driver's door unlocked, too. So naturally,

being teenage boys, they got in and took the SUV for a spin."

"*I* would have," said Lucas.

"You *did*, I recall."

"What happened next?"

"From Peabody, David went south on Ninth to Missouri, then drove east. He caught North Capitol along Rock Creek Cemetery and took that cutoff street west, the stretch that goes by the Soldiers' Home."

"That would be Allison," said Lucas, starting to see it, like he was looking down at a detail map. He had a cop's knowledge of D.C. because he was out in it, street level, most of his waking hours. When he didn't have to drive his Cherokee, Lucas rode his bicycle around town. At night he often walked.

"Here's where they got in trouble. David, keep in mind he's fifteen, no significant driving experience far as I know, he loses control of the SUV. Sideswipes a lady in a Buick, which knocks her out of her lane and into a couple of parked cars."

"By now they'd be on Rock Creek Church Road."

"Yeah, there," said Petersen. "The woman in the Buick? Claims she's got neck injuries."

"That's not good."

"I'm gonna work something out with her attorney."

"This kid's father must be flush."

"He is."

"This where the police come in?"

"Happens to be a patrol car, coupla uniforms idling nose out at Second and Varnum see this collision."

"And the chase is on."

"Took the police officer a half minute to put his coffee down and flip on the siren and light bar. By that time, David knew he'd been burned, and he jumps the sidewalk and cuts right onto Upshur Street."

"Driving on the Sidewalk, that's a good one."

"Fleeing and Eluding, Leaving the Scene of an Accident, Auto Theft…"

"Kid's got a rack of problems."

"He fishtails when he hits Upshur. Comes out of that and pins it. You know Upshur going west there—"

"It's long and straight. Downhill."

Petersen leaned forward, getting into it. "This boy is screaming down Upshur, Spero. Blowing four-ways, Wale or whatever coming loud out the windows."

"Nah," said Lucas, chuckling.

"What?"

"Now you're making shit up. You don't know what they were listening to."

"True. They're coming down Upshur, the patrol car, pretty far back but gaining ground, in pursuit. Eventually our boys hit that commercial strip getting down toward Georgia Avenue, at Ninth."

"I know the spot," said Lucas. He was drawing a rough map, very quickly, in his notebook.

"And there's another cop car," said Petersen, "parked right there on the street. The driver is waiting on his partner, who's getting a pack of smokes in a little market they got in that strip."

"What market?" said Lucas.

"I don't know the name of it. Spanish joint, eight hundred

block, north side of Upshur. Beer and wine, pork rinds, like that. It's in the file, along with the address. What happens next is, David sees this police car, and I guess he panics, and here's where he makes the last mistake. He cuts a sharp right into an alley, right before Ninth."

"And?"

"A car is parked in the alley, blocking their way. The boys get out of the vehicle and run; David Hawkins is apprehended on the street. The other boy, Duron, is caught a little while later, attempting to hide in the bathroom of an El Salvadoran restaurant around the corner."

"Who arrested David?"

"The officer waiting in the patrol car. A Clarence Jackson. By then the car in pursuit had arrived on the scene."

"How'd Officer Jackson know that David was one of the boys in the car?"

"In his report, Jackson stated that he observed two boys exit an SUV that they had driven into the alley. Jackson got to David first. The arriving officers arrested Duron in the restaurant."

"Where was Officer Jackson parked when he saw this?"

"It's in the file."

Lucas sat still for a long minute, looking at nothing. He closed his notebook and got up out of his seat. He stood five-foot-eleven, went one eighty-five, had a flat stomach and a good chest and shoulders. His hair was black and he wore it short. His eyes were green, flecked with gold, and frequently unreadable. He was twenty-nine years old.

Petersen watched Lucas stretch. "Sorry. That seat's unforgiving."

"It's these wood floors. The chair sits funny on 'em cause the planks are warped."

"This house goes back to the nineteenth century."

"Your point is what?"

"Ghosts of greatness walk these rooms. I start messing with the floors, I might make them angry."

A young GW law student entered Petersen's office and dropped a large block of papers on his desk. She was dark haired, fully curved, and effortlessly attractive. Tom Petersen's interns looked more or less like younger versions of his knockout wife.

"The Parker briefs," said the woman, whose name was Constance Kelly.

"Thank you," said Petersen. He watched Lucas admire her as she walked away.

Petersen stood and went to the eastern window of his office. Below, on the street, lawyers pulled wheeled briefcases toward the courthouse, uniformed and plainclothes police bullshitted with one another, mothers spoke patiently and angrily with their sons, civil servants took cigarette breaks, and folks of all shapes and colors went in and out of the Potbelly shop on the first floor.

"Life's rich pageant," said Petersen.

"That's a rock record from back in your day, right?"

"Inspector Clouseau, originally."

"You got me on that one."

"I have twenty years on you. At times the perspective is obvious. Other times, no." Petersen looked him over with the respect that men who have not served give to those who have. "You've seen a lot, haven't you?"

"It's been interesting, so far." Lucas slipped his notebook into his jacket and picked up the David Hawkins file off Petersen's desk.

"Bring me something back I can use," said Petersen.

Lucas nodded. "I'll get out there."

THE NEXT morning he stopped by the Glenwood Cemetery in Northeast to see his *baba*. Glenwood was an old but well-kept graveyard, acres of rolling, high-ground land holding plots with headstones memorializing lives going back to the 1800s. His father was buried here, beside his own parents, on the west side of the facility, which bordered dead-end residential streets stemming off North Capitol in a neighborhood called Stronghold. Past this last section of graves the land dropped off and there went Bryant Street, its short block of row homes in a neat descending line. Lucas looked down at his father's marker and placed a dozen roses on his plot. He said a silent prayer of thanks for the granting of life, did his *stavro*, and got back in his four-wheel.

He drove a 2001 Jeep Cherokee, the old boxy model with the legendary in-line 6. The model had been discontinued years ago, but because it was sturdy and reliable there were many of them still on the streets. In that respect it was the aughts version of the old Dodge Dart. With his black Jeep, empty of bumper stickers or decals, and his utilitarian clothing, Lucas was unmemorable by design, a tradesman, maybe, or a meter reader, just another workingman quietly going about his business in the city.

Lucas went up to Peabody and began to drive the route of David Hawkins and his friend Duron. Missouri, North

Capitol, Allison, and then Rock Creek Church, where it had begun to go wrong. He recalled the adrenaline rush he had experienced the day he and a couple of buddies from the wrestling team had stolen a car, back in high school. It didn't matter who suggested it; they had all participated with enthusiasm, and all had been caught, arrested, and charged. They pled down, and, because they were white and came from stable families, they had pulled community service and loose supervision. There were no further problems; Lucas's mistake was a one-shot deal, and he did not want to shame his parents in that way ever again. By the time he entered the Marine Corps, his conviction had been expunged.

He understood why David and Duron had stolen the SUV. Teenage boys did stupid things; their brains were wired for impulse and fun. Wasn't but a little more than ten years back that he had been one of those reckless boys, too, before September 11 and his tour of Iraq. A sobering decade, a decade that stole his youth.

Lucas drove west on Upshur. He gunned the Jeep going down the hill and pulled over when he reached the commercial strip, near Georgia Avenue. He saw the alley, cut along a salmon-colored building, currently unoccupied, where the boys had been trapped. He looked at the south and north sides of the strip and he studied the businesses and the layout of the street. In his notebook he drew a map showing the locations of the establishments. On the south side: a funeral parlor, a dry cleaner's, a carryout featuring Chinese/steak-and-cheese, a nail salon, and a hair salon; on the north side: a storefront church, a market selling wine and beer, a furnishings store that seemed too upscale for the

neighborhood, a hair salon, a Caribbean café, the alley, the salmon-colored building, another Chinese/American hybrid, a seafood carryout, a beverage shop, and on the corner a shuttered barbershop. Many of the stores had English and Spanish signage in their windows; there were blacks, Hispanics, and a few whites out on the street.

He got out of the car and, using his iPhone, took photographs of these businesses and their spots on the block. No one questioned him or got in his way. He went around the corner and noted the commercial layout of Ninth: the Petworth station of the U.S. Post Office, a private-detective agency, another funeral home, the Salvadoran restaurant where Duron had tried to hide, an embroidery shop, and a corner Spanish grocery store that did not have any English signage and was padlocked shut. Above the detective agency door was a lightbox that read "Strange Investigations," with several letters enlarged by the magnifying-glass logo placed over them. He had heard tell of the man, Derek Strange, and his latest partner, a middle-aged Greek whose name he could not recall.

Lucas retraced his steps, crossed Upshur and stood by the Chinese eat-house, where in his report Officer Clarence Jackson stated that he had been parked, and saw that indeed it afforded a direct view of the alley. He took a photograph from that perspective. He looked across the street to the market where Jackson's partner had bought his smokes, and he saw that there was a fire hydrant in front of it. That would explain why Jackson had parked across the street. It would have explained it perfectly, except for the fact that Jackson was police.

Lucas crossed Upshur once again and entered the beer and wine market. It was clean, well stocked with alcohol and food packaged in bags, its walls lined with steel shelving and reach-in coolers. Behind the register counter was a man in his forties, round brown face, white shirt open at the neck revealing a gold crucifix in a thicket of black chest hair. By his bearing and the gold-and-diamond ring on his finger, Lucas surmised that he was the owner. When questioned, the man confirmed this. Lucas gave him his name and identified himself simply as an "investigator." He asked if the owner, who called himself Odin, recalled the day of the arrest, and Odin said that he did. He asked Odin where the officer had been parked when his partner had entered the market to buy his smokes, and Odin said, "He park out front." When Lucas noted that there was a fire hydrant out front, Odin, who like many hardworking Hispanics was a law-and-order man, said rather defensively, "But he is police; he park where he want!"

Lucas got the man's contact information, thanked him, and made a note in his book regarding the pronunciation of Odin's name. He left the store and took multiple photographs of the alley from the point of view of the empty parking spot. He framed these so that the fire hydrant was in the foreground of the shots.

THE NEXT day, Lucas was sitting on the edge of Constance the intern's desk, trying to talk her into something, when Petersen called out to him from his office.

"We should continue this conversation later on," said Lucas.

"You think so?" said Constance, a strand of dark hair over

one eye, light freckles across the bridge of her nose. She reminded Lucas of one of those J. Crew girls. There was no trace of a smile on her face, but there was a light in her eyes, and Lucas knew that if he wanted to be in, he was in.

Petersen was behind his desk, loud striped shirt untucked, his blond hair shaggy around his face, looking like an aged Brian Jones. He was checking out photos on his computer screen, displayed from a disk that Lucas had burned from his iPhone.

"These are interesting," said Petersen, Lucas now standing beside him.

"The ones with the hydrant in the foreground? That would approximate the sight line of Officer Jackson. From where he was actually parked, as opposed to where he *said* he was parked."

"He couldn't have seen deep into the alley from there."

"He could only have seen the head of it, and a small piece of it at that. The report says the Denali was found at the back edge of that salmon-colored building. So, from that perspective, there's no way Jackson could have observed David and Duron get out of that SUV."

"Can anyone testify that Jackson was parked in front of the market?"

From his back pocket Lucas produced his notebook and opened it. "The owner. His name is Odin Nolasco." Lucas spelled it and Petersen wrote it down. Lucas said, "It's pronounced Oh-deen. I don't think he'd willingly discredit a police officer's official report. You're going to have to subpoena him. When you get him on the stand you might have to treat him as hostile."

"Thank you for the legal advice, counselor."

"I'm sayin."

"The visual ID, the link of the boys to the SUV, that's the prosecution's case right there."

"Weren't the boys' prints on the Denali?"

"Their prints were all over it. But that's less significant than what we have here. I was weighing a plea, but now I want this to go to trial. You put it into a D.C. jury's head that a police officer gave false testimony to make a case against a juvenile, nine times out of ten that jury's going to acquit, even in the face of damning evidence."

"Well, there's your ammunition." Lucas held up the notebook. "I've got street maps I drew, right in here, if you need them."

"The Book of Luke."

"Yes, sir."

"Good work, man."

"Thank you."

Lucas began to walk from the office, and Petersen stopped him. "Spero?"

"Yeah."

"Don't bother Constance. She's a nice girl."

"I like nice girls," said Lucas. He meant it, too.

IT WENT the way Petersen said it would. A month later, he phoned Lucas and got him on his cell.

"David Hawkins was acquitted," said Petersen.

"Duron?" said Lucas.

"Duron will walk, too."

"Do I get a bonus, somethin?"

"In a way. But not from me."

"That would be out of character."

"David's father, Anwan Hawkins, would like to meet you. I think he has something like an extra envelope in mind."

"Anwan Hawkins the dealer?"

"Yeah. Up on trafficking charges at the moment, unfortunately. He's currently in the D.C. Jail."

"He wants me to come there?"

"Uh-huh."

"Visitation days are set by the first letter in the last names, right?"

"That's for social visits; the prison makes audio recordings of those conversations. You should go in as one of my official investigators. Those conversations are confidential."

"Got it."

"I'll put a letter in to the DOC. It takes twenty-four hours to clear."

"You know what Hawkins wants?"

"I believe Anwan is going to make you some sort of a proposal. But I can't have you taking on any side work for a week or so. You've got those interviews to do for me on that Southeast thing. I'm defending Reginald Brooks, the shooter. Remember?"

"I do."

"So what should I tell Anwan?" Petersen got no comment from Lucas. "Spero?"

"I'll meet with him," said Lucas. "See what he has to say."

Which is how Spero Lucas met Anwan Hawkins, and the truck began to roll downhill.