

# GROOK HAVEN

THE SCHOOL FOR THIEVES

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ILLUSTRATED BY  
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For my grandpa, who has read every word  
of every story I have ever written.

# CHAPTER ONE

**G**abriel Avery hadn't picked a pocket in weeks and the tips of his fingers were starting to itch.

Summer was fast coming to an end and each week fewer tourists were passing through Torbridge, which meant fewer pockets for Gabriel to pick. Even the tourists who did come never stayed in the village long. After all, there were only so many photos someone could take of the town's main attraction – a hideous granite boulder-bridge – before getting bored and leaving. Thankfully for Gabriel, a steady trickle of commuters still passed through daily. No doubt on the way to faraway places where wonderfully exciting things happened.

Gabriel had only lived in Torbridge for a year and already he felt that pretty much *anywhere* else would be more exciting.

It was early on a Monday morning and Gabriel was leaning against the wall of the train station waiting for the

next train to pull in. Soon the platform would be alive with people changing to head north to Exeter or south to Cornwall. But at the moment, only two men in dark suits waited, and they were backlit by the rising sun so Gabriel couldn't get a good look at them.

*Probably locals*, he thought, yawning. He never picked a local's pocket. They'd only recognise him and tell Grandma. And after his most recent incident he was already in her bad books.

Come to think of it, Gabriel wasn't sure he'd *ever* been in Grandma's good books since they'd moved to Torbridge.

It was before eight and everyone getting off the trains would be grumpy, tired and, best of all, completely uninterested in Gabriel. Which meant he could move between them like a twinkle-fingered ghost. Excitement raced through him at the thought. For the last few weeks he'd been so busy helping Grandma at the mansion that he hadn't been back here, and *man* did he miss it.

He shivered in the crisp morning wind and pulled the sleeves of his blue jumper over his hands. Cold fingers were stiff and clumsy and no good to him at all. He needed them warm and nimble and steady.

To his left, Benson's Café was selling warm drinks from an open window. The sweet scent of hot chocolate and the bitter tang of coffee wafted over on thin tendrils of steam. Inside, the sound of bacon sizzling joined the hiss and glug of the coffee being made.

His stomach growled.

*First thing I'm getting with my takings is a bacon sandwich, he thought, and a sausage one for Grandma.*

A to-go cup of coffee sat on one of the high tables beside the open window, still faintly steaming. Gabriel waited until the barista disappeared inside before edging over and nicking it. He hated the taste of coffee, but the warm cup was perfect for loosening his stiff fingers.

A few minutes later, he heard the gentle rumble of an approaching train and pushed off the wall to get a better view. He placed the cup on a nearby bench and watched as the passengers piled off the train.

Gabriel frowned. Autumn closing in meant he'd have to start contending with coats and jackets, each with several pockets. He never had time to check every pocket so would often have to guess. But after a few years at this he'd gotten pretty good at guessing. And luckily, not all who disembarked had planned for the unseasonal chill in the air that morning.

Most of the passengers stayed on the platform to wait for their connecting train, but a few headed right, towards the café.

Gabriel grinned and took out a 2p coin. He'd had it for as long as he could remember. What was unique about it was that one side – heads – gleamed the normal copper, while the other – tails – was black. Almost as if it had been burned. Why, he didn't know. But it looked pretty cool, and it had become a key part of his gambit.

Gabriel flicked the coin into the air with his thumb, caught it in his palm, then flicked it high again. He was just about to put his plan into action when he heard a familiar voice.

‘Gabriel Avery, is that you, boy?’

Gabriel caught the coin, quickly slipped it into his pocket and looked up. Theodora Evans looked back at him. Her face was all deep creases and sickly, greyish skin, brought on, he thought, by a combination of non-stop frowning and fifty years of smoking.

‘Morning Mrs Evans,’ Gabriel said sweetly.

If possible, her face soured further. ‘What are you doing at the train station at this hour?’ She pursed her wrinkled lips. ‘Up to no good, I’ll bet.’

Gabriel pretended to look hurt by the accusation. ‘Not at all, Mrs Evans. I came to get Grandma a sausage sandwich from Benson’s. They’re her favourite.’ He shrugged. ‘I thought I’d surprise her.’

Mrs Evans’ face softened for a moment. Then hardened again. ‘A likely story.’ She leant closer. ‘I know it was you who pilfered the steak and kidney pie from my windowsill last week, Gabriel Avery. I just *know* it.’

Gabriel furrowed his brow. ‘What does *pilfered* mean, Mrs Evans?’ Of course, Gabriel knew exactly what pilfered – and every other word related to thievery – meant.

Mrs Evans’ watery grey eyes were so close now. ‘Means you *stole* it.’

Gabriel took a step back and raised his jumper and

T-shirt, revealing a scrawny, olive-skinned torso. ‘Does this look like the tummy of a pie thief, Mrs Evans?’

She straightened, thrown by this. ‘You’ve got a smart tongue, Gabriel Avery. A little too smart, if you ask me. No good, honest, *godly* boy allows such lies to slither off his tongue so easily.’

Gabriel let his shirt and jumper fall. ‘I wish I *had* been there, Mrs Evans – then I might’ve caught whoever did steal it. But I wasn’t.’ Gabriel had been there, of course. And while the pie’s crust had been pure buttery deliciousness, the filling hadn’t been nearly as tasty as normal. It was, in Gabriel’s humble opinion, Mrs Evans’ weakest attempt yet.

Unconvinced, Mrs Evans grunted once, loudly, and turned out of the train station muttering under her breath.

Gabriel dug his coin out of his pocket again and turned back towards the platform. A few people had already formed a queue at the café’s window. He frowned. Queues were difficult. If something happened to one person in the queue – be they bumped or tripped – the rest often looked over. And more eyes meant more of a chance one of them would notice a wayward hand. Gabriel turned to see if anyone was approaching the café.

Two people were. But they were too close together to try anything.

There was, however, a silver-haired man walking just behind them.

*What about him?* Gabriel thought, eyeing the figure.

*No coat. Loose-fitting trousers. A wallet-sized lump in his left pocket. Distracted by his phone. Looks perfect to me.*

Gabriel started to flick his coin in the air again. He waited for the other two to pass, then hurried directly towards the man. They collided, shoulder to hip, and Gabriel's coin clattered to the concrete floor.

'Sorry lad, that's my fault,' the man said, slipping his phone into his right pocket and giving Gabriel an apologetic smile. 'Here, let me get that for you.'

'It's OK,' Gabriel said, pretending to look flustered. 'It's just an old coin.' But the man was already leaning down, exposing the thin, black leather wallet in his left pocket.

One minute it was there, the next it wasn't.

The man straightened and held out Gabriel's coin, heads up. 'Where'd you get this, then? I've never seen a coin in such bad shape.'

'It was a present,' Gabriel said with a shrug. 'From my parents.' That, at least, was true. The only other things those two had ever given him were his honey-brown hair and burnt-amber eyes, and he didn't much care for those features anyway.

The man dropped the coin into Gabriel's hand and Gabriel pocketed it. 'Better than a screen, I suppose.' The man pulled his phone out of his pocket. 'These things are evil, lad. Stick to playing with coins for as long as you can.'

Gabriel nodded politely. 'Sorry again for bumping you.'



The man tapped him on the shoulder as he passed, eyes already glued to his phone. ‘Not at all, lad. Not at all.’

Gabriel turned the corner and, after snatching a glance over his shoulder, carefully pulled the black leather wallet out of his pocket. He grinned. *As easy as taking a steak and kidney pie off Mrs Evans’ windowsill.*

He opened it and . . .

*That’s strange.* It was almost completely empty. Inside there was just one ten-pound note and something white – a card, it looked like – poking out from one of the sleeves. Gabriel slid it out and read.

YOU'RE GOOD.  
I'M BETTER.

Gabriel swivelled and sprinted back towards the café. The queue was down to two now.

The man wasn’t either of them.

Gabriel turned, eyes frantically scanning the platform for the silver-haired figure. The train was just starting to crawl away and—

*Oh no . . .*

The man was sitting in a window seat on the train, smiling. Gabriel locked eyes with him. Slowly, the man held something up against the glass. It was small and circular and looked burnt on one side.

Gabriel, heart thumping, dug into his pocket and pulled out a 2p. But it was not his coin.