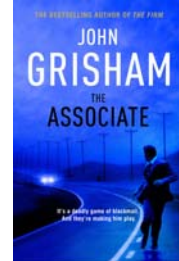




RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

**The Associate**  
**by John Grisham**

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1.

The rules of the New Haven Youth League required that each kid play at least ten minutes in each game. Exceptions were allowed for players who had upset their coaches by skipping practice or violating other rules. In such cases, a coach could file a report before the game and inform the scorekeeper that so-and-so wouldn't play much, if at all, because of some infraction. This was frowned on by the league; it was, after all, much more recreational than competitive.

With four minutes left in the game, Coach Kyle looked down the bench, nodded at a somber and pouting little boy named Marquis, and said, "Do you want to play?" Without responding, Marquis walked to the scorers' table and waited for a whistle. His violations were numerous—skipping practice, skipping school, bad grades, losing his uniform, foul language. In fact, after ten weeks and fifteen games, Marquis had broken every one of the few rules his coach tried to enforce. Coach Kyle had long since realized that any new rule would be immediately violated by his star, and for that reason he trimmed his list and fought the temptation to add new regulations. It wasn't working. Trying to control ten inner-city kids with a soft touch had put the Red Knights in last place in the 12 and Under division of the winter league.

Marquis was only eleven, but clearly the best player on the court. He preferred shooting and scoring over passing and defending, and within two minutes he'd slashed through the lane, around and through and over much larger players, and scored six points. His average was fourteen, and if allowed to play more than half a game, he could probably score thirty. In his own young opinion, he really didn't need to practice.

In spite of the one-man show, the game was out of reach. Kyle McAvoy sat quietly on the bench, watching the game and waiting for the clock to wind down. One game to go and the season would be over, his last as a basketball coach. In two years he'd won a dozen, lost two dozen, and asked himself how any person in his right mind would willingly coach at any level. He was doing it for the kids, he'd said to himself a thousand times, kids with no fathers, kids from bad homes, kids in need of a positive male influence. And he still believed it, but after two years of babysitting, and arguing with parents when they bothered to show up, and hassling with other coaches who were not above cheating, and trying to ignore teenage referees who didn't know a block from a charge, he was fed up. He'd done his community service, in this town anyway.

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He watched the game and waited, yelling occasionally because that's what coaches are supposed to do. He looked around the empty gym, an old brick building in downtown New Haven, home to the youth league for fifty years. A handful of parents were scattered through the bleachers, all waiting for the final horn. Marquis scored again. No one applauded. The Red Knights were down by twelve with two minutes to go.

At the far end of the court, just under the ancient scoreboard, a man in a dark suit walked through the door and leaned against the retractable bleachers. He was noticeable because he was white. There were no white players on either team. He stood out because he wore a suit that was either black or navy, with a white shirt and a burgundy tie, all under a trench coat that announced the presence of an agent or a cop of some variety.

Coach Kyle happened to see the man when he entered the gym, and he thought to himself that the guy was out of place. Probably a detective of some sort, maybe a narc looking for a dealer. It would not be the first arrest in or around the gym.

After the agent/cop leaned against the bleachers, he cast a long suspicious look at the Red Knights' bench, and his eyes seemed to settle on Coach Kyle, who returned the stare for a second before it became uncomfortable. Marquis let one fly from near mid-court, air ball, and Coach Kyle jumped to his feet, spread his hands wide, shook his head as if to ask, "Why?" Marquis ignored him as he loafed back on defense. A dumb foul stopped the clock and prolonged the misery. While looking at the free-throw shooter, Kyle glanced beyond him, and in the background was the agent/cop, still staring, not at the action but at the coach.

For a twenty-five-year-old law student with no criminal record and no illegal habits or proclivities, the presence and the attention of a man who gave all indications of being employed by some branch of law enforcement should have caused no concern whatsoever. But it never worked that way with Kyle McAvoy. Street cops and state troopers didn't particularly bother him. They were paid to simply react. But the guys in dark suits, the investigators and agents, the ones trained to dig deep and discover secrets—those types still unnerved him.

Thirty seconds to go and Marquis was arguing with a referee. He'd thrown an F-bomb at a ref two weeks earlier and was suspended for a game. Coach Kyle yelled at his star, who never listened. He quickly scanned the gym to see if agent/cop No. 1 was alone or was now accompanied by agent/cop No. 2. No, he was not.

Another dumb foul, and Kyle yelled at the referee to just let it slide. He sat down and ran his finger over the side of his neck, then flicked off the perspiration. It was early February, and the gym was, as always, quite chilly.

Why was he sweating?

The agent/cop hadn't moved an inch; in fact he seemed to enjoy staring at Kyle.

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The decrepit old horn finally squawked. The game was mercifully over. One team cheered, and one team really didn't care. Both lined up for the obligatory high fives and "Good game, good game," as meaningless to twelve-year-olds as it is to college players. As Kyle congratulated the opposing coach, he glanced down the court. The white man was gone.

What were the odds he was waiting outside? Of course it was paranoia, but paranoia had settled into Kyle's life so long ago that he now simply acknowledged it, coped with it, and moved on.

The Red Knights regrouped in the visitors' locker room, a cramped little space under the sagging and permanent stands on the home side. There Coach Kyle said all the right things—nice effort, good hustle, our game is improving in certain areas, let's finish on a high note this Saturday. The boys were changing clothes and hardly listening. They were tired of basketball because they were tired of losing, and of course all blame was heaped upon the coach. He was too young, too white, too much of an Ivy Leaguer.

The few parents who were there waited outside the locker room, and it was those tense moments when the team came out that Kyle hated most about his community service. There would be the usual complaints about playing time. Marquis had an uncle, a twenty-two-year-old former all-state player with a big mouth and a fondness for bitching about Coach Kyle's unfair treatment of the "best player in the league."

From the locker room, there was another door that led to a dark narrow hallway that ran behind the home stands and finally gave way to an outside door that opened into an alley. Kyle was not the first coach to discover this escape route, and on this night he wanted to avoid not only the families and their complaints but also the agent/ cop. He said a quick goodbye to his boys, and as they fled the locker room, he made his escape. In a matter of seconds he was outside, in the alley, then walking quickly along a frozen sidewalk. Heavy snow had been plowed, and the sidewalk was icy and barely passable. The temperature was somewhere far below freezing. It was 8:30 on a Wednesday, and he was headed for the law journal offices at the Yale Law School, where he would work until midnight at least.

He didn't make it.

The agent was leaning against the fender of a red Jeep Cherokee that was parked parallel on the street. The vehicle was titled to one John McAvoy of York, Pennsylvania, but for the past six years it had been the reliable companion of his son, Kyle, the true owner.

Though his feet suddenly felt like bricks and his knees were weak, Kyle managed to trudge on as if nothing were wrong. Not only did they find me, he said to himself as he tried to think clearly, but they've done their homework and found

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my Jeep. Not exactly high-level research. I have done nothing wrong, he said again and again.

"Tough game, Coach," the agent said when Kyle was ten feet away and slowing down.

Kyle stopped and took in the thick young man with red cheeks and red bangs who'd been watching him in the gym. "Can I help you?" he said, and immediately saw the shadow of No. 2 dart across the street. They always worked in pairs.

No. 1 reached into a pocket, and as he said "That's exactly what you can do," he pulled out a leather wallet and flipped it open. "Bob Plant, FBI."

"A real pleasure," Kyle said as all the blood left his brain and he couldn't help but flinch.

No. 2 wedged himself into the frame. He was much thinner and ten years older with gray around the temples. He, too, had a pocketful, and he performed the well-rehearsed badge presentation with ease. "Nelson Ginyard, FBI," he said.

Bob and Nelson. Both Irish. Both northeastern.

"Anybody else?" Kyle asked.

"No. Got a minute to talk?"

"Not really."

"You might want to," Ginyard said. "It could be very productive."

"I doubt that."

"If you leave, we'll just follow," Plant said as he stood from his slouch position and took a step closer. "You don't want us on campus, do you?"

"Are you threatening me?" Kyle asked. The sweat was back, now in the pits of his arms, and despite the arctic air a bead or two ran down his ribs.

"Not yet," Plant said with a smirk.

"Look, let's spend ten minutes together, over coffee," Ginyard was saying. "There's a sandwich shop just around the corner. I'm sure it's warmer there."

"Do I need a lawyer?"

"No."

"That's what you always say. My father is a lawyer and I grew up in his office. I know your tricks."

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"No tricks, Kyle, I swear," Ginyard said, and he at least sounded genuine. "Just give us ten minutes. I promise you won't regret it."

"What's on the agenda?"

"Ten minutes. That's all we ask."

"Give me a clue or the answer is no."

Bob and Nelson looked at each other. Both shrugged. Why not? We'll have to tell him sooner or later. Ginyard turned and looked down the street and spoke into the wind. "Duquesne University. Five years ago. Drunk frat boys and a girl."

Kyle's body and mind had different reactions. His body conceded— a quick slump of the shoulders, a slight gasp, a noticeable jerk in the legs. But his mind fought back instantly. "That's bullshit!" he said, then spat on the sidewalk. "I've already been through this. Nothing happened and you know it."

There was a long pause as Ginyard continued to stare down the street while Plant watched their subject's every move. Kyle's mind was spinning. Why was the FBI involved in an alleged state crime? In second-year Criminal Procedure they had studied the new laws regarding FBI interrogation. It was now an indictable offense to simply lie to an agent in this very situation. Should he shut up? Should he call his father? No, under no circumstances would he call his father.

Ginyard turned, took three steps closer, clenched his jaw like a bad actor, and tried to hiss his tough-guy words. "Let's cut to the chase, Mr. McAvoy, because I'm freezing. There's an indictment out of Pittsburgh, okay. Rape. If you want to play the hard-ass smart-ass brilliant law student and run get a lawyer, or even call your old man, then the indictment comes down tomorrow and the life you have planned is pretty much shot to shit. However, if you give us ten minutes of your valuable time, right now, in the sandwich shop around the corner, then the indictment will be put on hold, if not forgotten altogether."

"You can walk away from it," Plant said from the side. "Without a word."

"Why should I trust you?" Kyle managed to say with a very dry mouth.

"Ten minutes."

"You got a tape recorder?"

"Sure."

"I want it on the table, okay? I want every word recorded because I don't trust you."

"Fair enough."

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They jammed their hands deep into the pockets of their matching trench coats and stomped away. Kyle unlocked his Jeep and got inside. He started the engine, turned the heat on high, and thought about driving away.

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