

The background of the entire cover is black, overlaid with numerous splatters of bright red ink. The splatters vary in size and shape, creating a sense of movement and intensity. The text is rendered in a clean, sans-serif font, with the author's name and the title being significantly larger than the promotional text.

SCOTT
TUROW

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
PRESUMED INNOCENT

PRESUMED
GUILTY

A NOVEL

PRESUMED GUILTY

SCOTT TUROW



GRAND
CENTRAL

NEW YORK BOSTON

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Grand Central Publishing

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104

grandcentralpublishing.com

@grandcentralpub

First Edition: January 2025

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Turow, Scott, author.

Title: Presumed guilty / Scott Turow.

Description: First edition. | New York : Grand Central Publishing, 2025.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024025669 | ISBN 9781538706367 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781538771082 (large print) | ISBN 9781538706398 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Detective and mystery fiction. | Legal fiction (Literature). | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3570.U754 P68 2025 | DDC 813/.54—dc23/eng/20240621

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024025669>

ISBN: 9781538706367 (hardcover), 9781538706398 (ebook), 9781538771082 (large print), 9781538774441 (signed edition), 9781538774434 (special signed edition)

E3-20241120-JV-NF-ORI

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For six wonderful parents

Ben & Rachel

Liz & Gabe

Jason & Eve

With love and thanks

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I.

Gone

1

Gone

September 13, 2023

Aaron has disappeared. It has happened before and, despite my recent hopes, it will probably happen again. Everybody realizes that. Except his mother.

“Do you think he’s okay?” asks Bea, pronounced like the letter B. Thirteen months ago, as a gift of sorts for my seventy-fifth birthday, Bea agreed to marry me, although she’s been reluctant since then to set a date.

Late last night, while we were sleeping, a hellacious storm blew in from the north. The concussive power of the thunder doubled as it ricocheted off Mirror Lake, on whose shore we live. After a boom like an artillery round rattled our windows, I felt Bea rise—and a few minutes later tumble back into bed with a cheerless weight that let me know that Aaron was not home. Up for the morning, she’s just checked again, hope against hope, with the same result.

“Of course,” I answer about Aaron, doing my best to look convincing. “You know him. He’s probably by himself out in the woods.”

“But how did he get there?” Now that she asks, this is a troubling question. Since Aaron’s felony conviction a year and a half ago, after he was arrested with enough cocaine and meth to mean real trouble, his driver’s license has been suspended. More important, the terms of the strict probation he agreed to in order to get out of the Skageon County jail after four months there require him to live in our house and stay in close touch

with us. Aaron, we both know, could teach classes at the university level in how to get in your own way. And yet, this is the first time since he moved in that he has 'gone dark,' as he likes to put it, turning off his phone and voicemail, relieving himself of what he often finds the most onerous responsibility of civilization, the obligation to communicate.

I ask Bea whether her ex has heard from their son, and she says she hasn't tried Lloyd yet. She did speak to her own father, but Joe, who is close to Aaron, claimed to have no idea concerning his grandson's whereabouts.

"Do you believe him?" I ask, and Bea's face is mobile for an instant with her customary skepticism of her father.

"Probably," she says. For a second, we ponder one another in silence, until she asks, "We don't have to call the judge yet, do we?"

'We,' as she knows, is euphemistic. The sentencing judge, Morton Sams, thought that I, as a former judge myself, and someone who still needs his license to practice law, would understand my duty to the court if Aaron steps out of line.

"Not yet," I tell her. "It's one night. It could be anything. Maybe whoever's car he was in broke down. He'll turn up soon."

Before now, I would have said that Aaron has done well. He attends meetings faithfully, avoids the drug-addled crew who resembled the undead that he was living with before his arrest, and even found a job he loved. He was working for Galore, a party planner in the swanky summer enclave of Como Stop nearby, doing all manner of commercial art, everything from banners to designing invitations. But with the annual retreat of the seasonal residents, he was unexpectedly laid off last week. The support groups Bea attends emphasize how precarious sobriety is for someone like Aaron who is new to it. Now the unspoken probability that he has relapsed, and the dark complications that would invite, including the risk of a significant prison sentence, has turned his mother's fabulous amber eyes into lakes of misery.

At these moments I am impressed by the occasional cruelty of motherhood with its consuming anxieties that seem to have no expiration date. Bea often admits that until she and Lloyd adopted Aaron at birth, she

regarded herself as laid-back. Instead, her worries multiplied at once, as people she would never have suspected drew back at the sight of an infant in her arms who was, by some uncertain proportion, Black.

Until now, the new year that functionally commences in the US after Labor Day had fallen into a satisfying rhythm, after a languorous summer. I had returned my attention to the legal work I've done for the last decade, as a mediator and arbitrator—basically a privately paid judge—and Bea had survived the avalanche of administrative crises that befall a grade school principal at the start of every year. Ecclesiastes was not correct when he proclaimed that there is nothing new under the sun, but one of the comforts of this age is that there is less.

I have resided up here in what is called the Skageon Region for fourteen years. We are a bit more than one hundred miles north-northwest of Kindle County, where I had always lived before: Son. Student. Husband. Father. Prosecutor. Judge. A dutiful and generally successful existence. But that life collapsed under the impact of a series of numbing calamities that began with the death of my wife and culminated in a prison term for me, which ended unexpectedly when the prosecutor suddenly conceded I was innocent.

After my release, I planned to hide out up here for a year or so. I had no wish to explain myself to anyone and figured I'd wait long enough that people would forget to ask. Instead, I realized that aside from my son and granddaughters, whom I see once or twice a month, there was nothing in Kindle calling me back. The prospect of a new start in a very different place, where remaining solitary seemed more natural than antisocial, was appealing. Here I could recover at my own pace.

The Skageon Region contains a sort of variety pack of American life. At the western end is the magnificent Como Lake, whose clear waters run seven miles long and three across and more than two hundred feet deep. On its shore, every summer since the late nineteenth century, the rich at leisure have gathered, baronial families who would arrive by train from as far away as New York City to spend a few idyllic months in the vast mansions that hulked along the lake. The nearby place, where the railroad came to a halt,

was called Como Stop, a name that stuck as the town developed. Today Como Stop has roughly ten thousand full-time residents, and maintains a distinctly upscale vibe, with coffee shops and brew pubs and the kind of stylish stores selling brightly colored ladies' wear and home décor items familiar to well-to-do suburbs. Sixty miles east, in Carroll County, the old worn-out city of Kweagon, which was once the home to a US Motors plant, holds block after block of empty storefronts and dilapidated housing for the struggling communities of color.

Between the extremes of those two towns is where Bea and I and fifty thousand other people dwell. Outside Como Stop, shopping centers and townhouse developments have sprung up, principally serving those who toil in the many large warehouses and distribution centers along the interstate. Moving east, the rich land in the Skageon River Valley is given over to family farms, where dairy cows swish their tails, and corn, soybeans and alfalfa, as well as several kinds of fruits and vegetables, rise and fall. Here and there the large fields are broken up by the few remaining swaths of primary growth forest. On our side of the county, the footprints of the glaciers pushed the land into rocky formations with ponds and small lakes forming in the low spots.

It was the dream of a second home in that area, a place where we could swim and boat with our son, that first brought me and Barbara, my deceased wife, up here almost forty years ago. These days, fertilizer runoff leaves many of the local bodies of water eutrophic and rimmed in green algae, but we discovered Mirror Lake, sourced by subterranean creeks that percolate up through cleansing layers of limestone. The business of being a prosecutor, as I was then, gives you a proctologist's view of humanity. I wanted a haven for my family, away from the turmoil of the city and the anxieties of my job. For once, Barbara and I agreed, and we bought a small cabin at the rear of the property I now live on. (There's a story there, too, but I'll take them one at a time.) From May to late September, whenever I had a break between trials, we'd come up on the weekend, living in our bathing suits and striking up comfortable friendships with our neighbors.

I enjoyed the sense of reprieve and over time looked forward especially to Sunday mornings, when Nat and Barbara usually slept in, and I could ride my bike the three miles to Mirror, the little town nearby, where I was able to find a copy of the Kindle County *Tribune* at a local gas station. A billionaire commodities trader had purchased the *Trib*, determined to turn it into a national paper. The Sunday edition now had the heft of a phone book, and provided a whole day's reading with its expansive coverage of news and culture.

After my exile up here, I continued that habit but eventually found that periodically the station was sold out. Eventually, Ravi, the proprietor, told me that despite his protests, his distributor was delivering only a single copy of the Sunday *Tribune*. I started getting up earlier and earlier to snag it.

One Sunday, I walked in a little before seven a.m., and there was a shorter woman in front of the cashier. Her back was to me, her springy black hair banded in a ponytail, but I could see that she had 'my' copy of the paper in her hand, while she awaited change from Dema at the register. When the woman turned, I was deeply struck—yes, she was very attractive, at least by my lights, with those yellowish eyes that stood out like beacons in her darker complexion. But it was what passed through her face instantly that took hold of me, a bolt of intelligence, self-confidence and humor. Of course, she could tell at once from my crestfallen look why I was there.

She hesitated only a second and then asked, 'What's your favorite section?' I was startled, but said, if I had to pick, it would be the front pages, featuring world and national news.

Later in the day, I came back from fishing to find that section of the paper stuffed into my mailbox. The fact that she recognized me was not all that surprising. Since my life had once made headlines, I was fairly notorious around Skageon, and my address was in the phone book.

The next weekend I left her a note at the gas station that thanked her for her generosity, but informed her I was henceforth conceding the paper to her, having now taught myself how to access the digital edition (which apparently was the billionaire's new strategy to turn a profit). After my

release from prison, I had started a largely clandestine relationship with the widow, Lorna Murphy, who lived in the large lakeside house that fronted my cabin, but we had both moved on by then. I was dating occasionally, and considered whether it was wise to add another flirty line or two, asking my competitor, for instance, about *her* favorite section—but I decided against it. A woman with that kind of natural spark was almost certainly married or attached, and even if that weren't the case, I was, from the looks of it, about thirty years older than she was. More to the point, I decided, was the fact that she had delivered the front section to my mailbox without a note or card, a clear signal that she was not inviting further contact.

Now and then, when I was filling up at Ravi's, or visiting Mirror's one sparse grocery store, she'd cross my mind, but there were no further sightings. I accepted the judgment of fate, realizing that, as so often happens, she would likely turn out to be not half as interesting as she'd appeared in that initial moment.