

# JOHN GRISHAM

==== A NOVEL ====

## THE BOYS FROM BILOXI



## ALSO BY JOHN GRISHAM

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JOHN  
GRISHAM



THE BOYS  
FROM BILOXI



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# Contents

*Cover*

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*Title Page*

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## Part One: The Boys

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

## Part Two: The Crusader

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

### [Part Three: The Prisoners](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

## [Part Four: The Row](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

*[Author's Note](#)*

PART  
ONE



THE  
BOYS

## CHAPTER 1

A hundred years ago, Biloxi was a bustling resort and fishing community on the Gulf Coast. Some of its 12,000 people worked in shipbuilding, some in the hotels and restaurants, but for the majority their livelihoods came from the ocean and its bountiful supply of seafood. The workers were immigrants from Eastern Europe, most from Croatia where their ancestors had fished for centuries in the Adriatic Sea. The men worked the schooners and trawlers harvesting seafood in the Gulf while the women and children shucked oysters and packed shrimp for ten cents an hour. There were forty canneries side by side in an area known as the Back Bay. In 1925, Biloxi shipped twenty million tons of seafood to the rest of the country. Demand was so great, and the supply so plentiful, that by then the city could boast of being the “Seafood Capital of the World.”

The immigrants lived in either barracks or shotgun houses on Point Cadet, a peninsula on the eastern edge of Biloxi, around the corner from the beaches of the Gulf. Their parents and grandparents were Poles, Hungarians, Czechs, as well as Croatians, and they had been quick to assimilate into the ways of their new country. The children learned English, taught it to their parents, and rarely spoke the mother tongues at home. Most of their surnames had been unpronounceable to customs officials and had been modified and Americanized at the Port of New Orleans and Ellis Island. In Biloxi cemeteries, there were tombstones with names like Jurkovich, Horvat, Conovich, Kasich, Rodak, Babbich, and Peranich. They were scattered about and mixed with those of Smith, Brown, O’Keefe, Mattina, and Bellande. The immigrants were naturally clannish and self-protective, but by the second generation they were intermarrying with the early French families and all manner of Anglos.

Prohibition was still the law, and throughout the Deep South most Baptists and Methodists righteously pursued the dry life. Along the Coast, though, those of European descent and Catholic persuasion took a dimmer view of abstinence. In fact, Biloxi was never dry, regardless of the Eighteenth Amendment. When Prohibition swept the country in 1920 Biloxi hardly noticed. Its bars, dives, honky-tonks, neighborhood pubs, and upscale clubs not only remained open but thrived. Speakeasies were not necessary because booze was so prevalent and no one, especially the police, cared. Biloxi became a popular destination for parched Southerners. Add the allure of the beaches, delicious seafood, a temperate climate, and nice hotels, and tourism flourished. A hundred years ago the Gulf Coast became known as “the poor man’s Riviera.”

As always, unchecked vice proved contagious. Gambling joined drinking as the more popular illegal activities. Makeshift casinos sprang up in bars and clubs. Poker, blackjack, and dice games were in plain view and could be found everywhere. In the lobbies of the fashionable hotels there were rows of slot machines operating in blatant disregard for the law.

Brothels had been around forever but kept undercover. Not so in Biloxi. They were plentiful and serviced not only their faithful johns but police and politicians as well. Many were in the same buildings as bars and gambling tables so that a young man looking for pleasure need only one stop.

Though not flaunted as widely as sex and booze, drugs like marijuana and heroin were easy to find, especially in the music halls and lounges.

Journalists often found it difficult to believe that such illegal activity was so openly accepted in a state so religiously conservative. They wrote articles about the wild and freewheeling ways in Biloxi, but nothing changed. No one with authority seemed to care. The prevailing mood was simply: “That’s just the Biloxi.” Crusading politicians railed against the crime and preachers thundered from the pulpits, but there was never a serious effort to “clean up the Coast.”

The biggest obstacle facing any attempts at reform was the longtime corruption of the police and elected officials. The cops and deputies worked for meager salaries and were more than willing to take the cash and look the

other way. The local politicians were easily bought off and prospered nicely. Everyone was making money, everyone was having fun, why ruin a good thing? No one forced the drinkers and gamblers to venture into Biloxi. If they didn't like the vice there, they could stay home or go to New Orleans. But if they chose to spend their money in Biloxi, they knew they would not be bothered by the police.

Criminal activity got a major boost in 1941 when the military built a large training base on land that was once the Biloxi Country Club. It was named Keesler Army Airfield, after a World War I hero from Mississippi, and the name soon became synonymous with bad behavior from tens of thousands of soldiers getting ready for war. The number of bars, casinos, brothels, and striptease joints increased dramatically. As did crime. The police were flooded with complaints from soldiers: rigged slots, floating roulette, cheating dealers, spiked drinks, and sticky-fingered prostitutes. Since the owners were making money they complained little, but there were plenty of fights, assaults on their girls, and broken windows and whiskey bottles. As always, the police protected the ones who paid them, and the jailhouse doors revolved with GIs. Over half a million of them passed through Keesler on their way to Europe and the Pacific, and later Korea and Vietnam.

Biloxi vice was so profitable that it naturally attracted the usual assortment of characters from the underworld: career criminals, outlaws, bootleggers, smugglers, rumrunners, con men, hit men, pimps, leg-breakers, and a more ambitious class of crime lords. In the late 1950s, a branch of a loose-knit gang of violent thugs nicknamed the Dixie Mafia settled in Biloxi with plans to establish their turf and take over a share of the vice. Before the Dixie Mafia, there had always been jealousy among the club owners, but they were making money and life was good. There was a killing every now and then and the usual intimidation, but no serious efforts by one group to take over.

Other than ambition and violence, the Dixie Mafia had little in common with the real Cosa Nostra. It was not a family, thus there was little loyalty. Its members—and the FBI was never certain who was a member,

who was not, and how many claimed to be—were a loose assortment of bad boys and misfits who preferred crime over honest work. There was no established organization or hierarchy. No don at the top and leg-breakers at the bottom, with mid-level thugs in between. With time, one club owner managed to consolidate his holdings and assume more influence. He became “the Boss.”

What the Dixie Mafia had was a propensity for violence that often stunned the FBI. Through its history, as it evolved and made its way south to the Coast, it left behind an astonishing number of dead bodies, and virtually none of the murders were ever solved. It operated with only one rule, one hard-and-fast, cast-in-stone blood oath: “Thou shalt not snitch to the cops.” Those who did were either found in ditches or not found at all. Certain shrimp boats were rumored to unload weighted corpses twenty miles from shore, into the deep, warm waters of the Mississippi Sound.

In spite of its reputation for lawlessness, crime in Biloxi was kept under control by the owners and watched closely by the police. With time, the vice became roughly concentrated into one principal section of town, a one-mile stretch of Highway 90, along the beach. “The Strip” was lined with casinos, bars, and brothels, and was easily ignored by the law-abiding citizens. Life away from it was normal and safe. If one wanted trouble, it was easy to find. Otherwise, it was easy to avoid. Biloxi prospered because of seafood, shipbuilding, tourism, construction, and a formidable work ethic fueled by immigrants and their dreams of a better life. The city built schools, hospitals, churches, highways, bridges, seawalls, parks, recreational facilities, and anything else it needed to improve the lives of its people.

## CHAPTER 2

The rivalry began as a friendship between two boys with much in common. Both were third-generation grandsons of Croatian immigrants, and both were born and raised on “the Point,” as Point Cadet was known. Their families lived two streets apart. Their parents and grandparents knew each other well. They went to the same Catholic church, the same schools, played in the same streets, sandlots, and beaches, and fished with their fathers in the Gulf on lazy weekends. They were born one month apart in 1948, both sons of young war veterans who married their sweethearts and started families.

The Old World games of their ancestors were of little significance in Biloxi. The sandlots and youth fields were meant for baseball and nothing else. Like all the boys on the Point, they began throwing and hitting not long after they could walk, and they proudly put on their first uniforms when they were eight years old. By the age of ten, they were being noticed and talked about.

Keith Rudy, the older by twenty-eight days, was a left-handed pitcher who threw hard but wild, and frightened batters with his lack of control. He also hit from the left side, and when he wasn't on the mound he was anywhere his coaches wanted him; the outfield, second or third base. Because there were no catcher's mitts for lefties, he taught himself to catch, field, and throw with his right hand.

Hugh Malco was a right-handed pitcher who threw even harder and with more accuracy. From forty-five feet away he was terrifying to face, and most ten-year-old batters preferred to hide in the dugout. A coach convinced him to swing from the left side with the usual rationale that most pitchers at that age were right-handed. Babe Ruth hit leftie, as did Lou Gehrig and Stan Musial. Mickey, of course, could swat 'em from both

sides, but he was a Yankee. Hugh listened because he was easy to coach and wanted to win.

Baseball was their world, and the warm weather on the Coast allowed them to play almost year-round. Little League teams were drafted in late February and began games in the middle of March; two games a week for at least twelve weeks. When the regular season ended, with the city championship, the serious baseball began with all-star play. Biloxi dominated the state playoffs and was expected to advance to the regional tournament. No team had yet to make it to Williamsport for the big show, but optimism ran high every year.

The church was important, at least to their parents and grandparents, but for the boys the real institution was Cardinal baseball. There were no professional big-league teams in the Deep South. Station KMOX out of St. Louis broadcast every game, with Harry Caray and Jack Buck, and the boys knew the Cardinal players, their positions, stats, hometowns, and their strengths and weaknesses. They listened to every game, cut out every box score from the *Gulf Coast Register*, then spent hours on the sandlots replaying each inning. Every spare penny was saved to purchase baseball cards, and the trading was serious business. Topps was the preferred brand, primarily because the bubblegum lasted longer.

When summer arrived and school was out, the streets of the Point were filled with kids playing corkball, kickball, Wiffle ball, and a dozen other variations of the game. The older boys commandeered the sandlots and Little League fields where they chose teams and played for hours. On the big days, they went home and cleaned up, ate something, rested their worn arms and legs, put on their uniforms, and hustled back to the fields for real games that drew large crowds of family and friends. In the late afternoons and early evenings under the lights, the boys played hard and bantered back and forth across the diamond. They enjoyed the cheers from the fans and chided each other without mercy. An error brought an avalanche of catcalls. A home run silenced the opposing bench. A hard thrower on the mound cast a pall over any opponent. A bad call by an umpire was off-limits, at least to the players, but the fans knew no restraints. And everywhere, in the stands,

the parking lots, even the dugouts, transistor radios rattled on with the play-by-play broadcast from KMOX, and everyone knew the Cardinal score.

When they were twelve, Keith and Hugh had magical seasons. Keith played for a team sponsored by DeJean Packing. Hugh played for one sponsored by Shorty's Shell. They dominated the season and each team lost only once, to the other, by one run. With the flip of a coin, the DeJean Packing advanced to the city championship where they slaughtered a team from West Biloxi. Keith pitched all six innings, gave up two hits, walked four, and hit two home runs. He and Hugh were unanimous picks for the Biloxi All-Stars, and for the first time they were official teammates, though they had played together in countless sandlot games.

With Hugh firing from the right side and Keith terrifying batters from the left, Biloxi was the solid favorite to win another state championship. After a week of practice, their coaches loaded the team into three pickup trucks for the twenty-minute drive west along Highway 90 to the state tournament in Gulfport. Hundreds of fans followed in a rowdy caravan.

The tournament was dominated by teams from the southern part of the state: Biloxi, Gulfport, Pascagoula, Pass Christian and Hattiesburg. In the first game against Vicksburg, Keith threw a one-hitter and Hugh hit a grand slam. In the second game, Hugh threw a one-hitter and Keith returned the favor with two home runs. In five games, Biloxi scored thirty-six runs, gave up only four, and walked away with the state title. The town celebrated and sent the boys off to Pensacola with a party. Competition at the next level was a different matter because the Florida teams were waiting.

Nothing thrilled the boys more than a road trip, with motels and swimming pools and meals in restaurants. Hugh and Keith roomed together and were the undisputed leaders of the team, having been named co-captains by their coaches. They were inseparable, on the field and off, and all activities revolved around them. On the field, they were fierce competitors and cheerleaders, always encouraging the others to play smart, listen to the coaches, shake off errors, and study the game. Off the field, they held team meetings, led the pranks, approved nicknames, decided

which movies to watch, which restaurants to go to, and propped up teammates who sat on the bench.

In the first game, Hugh gave up four hits and Biloxi beat a team from Mobile, the Alabama state champs. In the second, Keith was wilder than ever and walked eight before being pulled in the fourth inning; Biloxi lost to a team from Jacksonville by three runs. Two days later, a team from Tampa scored four runs off Hugh in the bottom of the sixth inning and walked away with the win.

The season was over. The dreams of playing in the Little League World Series in Williamsport were once again crushed by the State of Florida. The team retreated to the motel to lick its wounds, but before long the boys were splashing in the pool and trying to get the attention of some older girls in bikinis.

Their parents watched from under poolside umbrellas and enjoyed cocktails. A long season was finally over and they were eager to get home and finish the summer without the hassle of daily baseball. Almost all of the parents were there, along with other relatives and a few die-hard fans from Biloxi. Some were close friends, others only friendly acquaintances. Most were from the Point and knew each other well, and among that group there were cracks in solidarity.

Hugh's parents, Lance and Carmen Malco, were feeling a bit shunned, and for good reason.