

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

JOHN GRISHAM

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STINGINGLY SATIRIC, AND ALMOST
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— *Entertainment Weekly*

A NOVEL

THE PARTNER



THE
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A Novel

JOHN
GRISHAM



A DELL BOOK
NEW YORK

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-one](#)

[Chapter Twenty-two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-one](#)

[Chapter Thirty-two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-nine](#)

[Chapter Forty](#)

[Chapter Forty-one](#)

[Chapter Forty-two](#)

[Chapter Forty-three](#)

[Other Books By This Author](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright](#)

For David Gernert
friend, editor, agent

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When asked, these friends gave me the truth. As usual, the mistakes are all mine.

One

THEY FOUND HIM in Ponta Porã, a pleasant little town in Brazil, on the border of Paraguay, in a land still known as the Frontier.

They found him living in a shaded brick house on Rua Tiradentes, a wide avenue with trees down the center and barefoot boys dribbling soccer balls along the hot pavement.

They found him alone, as best they could tell, though a maid came and went at odd hours during the eight days they hid and watched.

They found him living a comfortable life but certainly not one of luxury. The house was modest and could've been owned by any local merchant. The car was a 1983 Volkswagen Beetle, manufactured in São Paulo with a million others. It was red and clean, polished to a shine. Their first photo of him was snapped as he waxed it just inside the gate to his short driveway.

They found him much thinner, down considerably from the two hundred and thirty pounds he'd been carrying when last seen. His hair and skin were darker, his chin had been squared, and his nose had been slightly pointed. Subtle changes to the face. They'd paid a steep bribe to the surgeon in Rio who'd performed the alterations two and a half years earlier.

They found him after four years of tedious but diligent searching, four years of dead ends and lost trails and false tips, four years of pouring good money down the drain, good money chasing bad, it seemed.

But they found him. And they waited. There was at first the desire to snatch him immediately, to drug him and smuggle him to a safe house in Paraguay, to seize him before he saw them or before a neighbor became suspicious. The initial excitement of the finding made them consider a quick strike, but after two days they settled down and waited. They loitered at various points along Rua Tiradentes, dressed like the locals, drinking tea in the shade, avoiding the sun, eating ice cream, talking to the children, watching his house. They tracked him as he drove downtown to shop, and they photographed him from across the street as he left the pharmacy. They

eased very near him in a fruit market and listened as he spoke to the clerk. Excellent Portuguese, with the very slight accent of an American or a German who'd studied hard. He moved quickly downtown, gathering his goods and returning home, where he locked the gate behind him. His brief shopping trip yielded a dozen fine photos.

He had jogged in a prior life, though in the months before he disappeared his mileage shrunk as his weight ballooned. Now that he teetered on the brink of emaciation, they were not surprised to see him running again. He left his house, locking the gate behind him, and began a slow trot down the sidewalk along Rua Tiradentes. Nine minutes for the first mile, as the street went perfectly straight and the houses grew farther apart. The pavement turned to gravel on the edge of town, and halfway into the second mile his pace was down to eight minutes a mile and Danilo had himself a nice sweat. It was midday in October, the temperature near eighty, and he gained speed as he left town, past a small clinic packed with young mothers, past a small church the Baptists had built. The roads became dustier as he headed for the countryside at seven minutes a mile.

The running was serious business, and it pleased them mightily. Danilo would simply run into their arms.

THE DAY after the first sighting, a small unclean cottage on the edge of Ponta Porã was rented by a Brazilian named Osmar, and before long the rest of the pursuit team poured in. It was an equal mix of Americans and Brazilians, with Osmar giving the orders in Portuguese and Guy barking in English. Osmar could handle both languages, and had become the official interpreter for the team.

Guy was from Washington, an ex-government type who'd been hired to find Danny Boy, as he'd been nicknamed. Guy was considered a genius at some levels and immensely talented at others, and his past was a black hole. He was well into his fifth one-year contract to find Danny Boy, and there was a nice bonus for snagging the prey. Though he hid it well, Guy had been slowly cracking under the pressure of not finding Danny Boy.

Four years and three and a half million dollars, with nothing to show for it.

But now they'd found him.

Osmar and his band of Brazilians had not the slightest hint of Danny Boy's sins, but a fool could see that he'd disappeared and taken a trainload of money. And, although he was very curious about Danny Boy, Osmar had learned quickly not to ask questions. Guy and the Americans had nothing to say on the subject.

The pictures of Danny Boy were enlarged to eight by tens, and tacked along a wall in the kitchen of the dirty little cottage where they were studied by grim men with hard eyes, men who chain-smoked strong cigarettes and shook their heads at the photos. They whispered among themselves and compared the new photos to the old ones, the ones from his previous life. Smaller man, odd chin, different nose. His hair was shorter and his skin darker. Was it really him?

They had been through this before, in Recife, on the northeastern coast, nineteen months earlier when they'd rented an apartment and looked at photos on the wall until the decision was made to grab the American and check his fingerprints. Wrong prints. Wrong American. They pumped some more drugs in him and left him in a ditch.

They were afraid to dig too deeply into the current life of Danilo Silva. If he was in fact their man, then he had plenty of money. And cash always worked wonders with the local authorities. For decades, cash had bought protection for Nazis and other Germans who'd smuggled themselves into Ponta Porã.

Osmar wanted to grab him. Guy said they'd wait. He vanished on the fourth day, and the dirty little cottage was in chaos for thirty-six hours.

They saw him leave home in the red Beetle. He was in a hurry, came the report. He raced across town to the airport, jumped on a small commuter at the last moment, and was gone. His car was parked in the only lot, and they watched it every second of every hour. The plane was headed in the general direction of São Paulo, with four stops in between.

There was instantly a plan to enter his home and catalog everything. There had to be records. The money had to be tended to. Guy dreamed of finding bank statements, wire transfer reports, account summaries; all sorts

of documents arranged in a neat portfolio which would lead him directly to the money.

But he knew better. If Danny Boy ran because of them, then he would never leave behind the evidence. And if he was in fact their man, then his home would be carefully secured. Danny Boy, wherever he was, would probably know the instant they opened his door or window.

They waited. They cursed and argued and strained even more under the pressure. Guy made his daily call to Washington, a nasty one. They watched the red Beetle. Each arrival brought out the binoculars and cell phones. Six flights the first day. Five the second. The dirty little cottage grew hot and the men settled outdoors—the Americans napping under a scrawny shade tree in the backyard and the Brazilians playing cards along the fence in the front.

Guy and Osmar took a long drive and vowed to grab him if he ever returned. Osmar was confident he would be back. Probably just out of town on business, whatever his business was. They'd snatch him, identify him, and if he happened to be the wrong man they'd simply throw him in a ditch and run. It had happened before.

He returned on the fifth day. They trailed him back to Rua Tiradentes, and everybody was happy.

ON THE EIGHTH DAY, the dirty cottage emptied as all the Brazilians and all the Americans took their positions.

The course was a six-miler. He had covered it each day he'd been home, leaving at almost the same time, wearing the same blue and orange runner's shorts, well-worn Nikes, ankle socks, no shirt.

The perfect spot was two and a half miles from his house, over a small hill on a gravel road, not far from his turning-around point. Danilo topped the hill twenty minutes into his run, a few seconds ahead of schedule. He ran harder, for some reason. Probably the clouds.

A small car with a flat tire was just over the hill, blocking the road, trunk opened, its rear jacked up. Its driver was a burly young man who pretended to be startled at the sight of the skinny racer sweating and panting as he

topped the hill. Danilo slowed for a second. There was more room to the right.

“Bom dia,” the burly young man said as he took a step toward Danilo.

“Bom dia,” Danilo said, approaching the car.

The driver suddenly pulled a large shiny pistol from the trunk and shoved it into Danilo’s face. He froze, his eyes locked onto the gun, his mouth open with heavy breathing. The driver had thick hands and long, stout arms. He grabbed Danilo by the neck and yanked him roughly toward the car, then down to the bumper. He stuck the pistol in a pocket and with both hands folded Danilo into the trunk. Danny Boy struggled and kicked, but was no match.

The driver slammed the trunk shut, lowered the car, tossed the jack into the ditch, and drove off. A mile away, he turned onto a narrow dirt path where his pals were anxiously waiting.

They tied nylon ropes around Danny Boy’s wrists and a black cloth over his eyes, then shoved him into the back of a van. Osmar sat to his right, another Brazilian to his left. Someone removed his keys from the Velcro runner’s pouch stuck to his waist. Danilo said nothing as the van started and began moving. He was still sweating and breathing even harder.

When the van stopped on a dusty road near a farm field, Danilo uttered his first words. “What do you want?” he asked, in Portuguese.

“Don’t speak,” came the reply from Osmar, in English. The Brazilian to Danilo’s left removed a syringe from a small metal box and deftly filled it with a potent liquid. Osmar pulled Danilo’s wrists tightly toward him while the other man jabbed the needle into his upper arm. He stiffened and jerked, then realized it was hopeless. He actually relaxed as the last of the drug entered his body. His breathing slowed; his head began to wobble. When his chin hit his chest, Osmar gently, with his right index finger, raised the shorts on Danilo’s right leg, and found exactly what he expected to find. Pale skin.

The running kept him thin, and it also kept him brown.

Kidnappings were all too common in the Frontier. Americans were easy targets. But why him? Danilo asked himself this as his head wobbled and

his eyes closed. He smiled as he fell through space, dodging comets and meteors, grabbing at moons and grinning through entire galaxies.

THEY STUFFED HIM under some cardboard boxes filled with melons and berries. The border guards nodded without leaving their chairs, and Danny Boy was now in Paraguay, though he couldn't have cared less at the moment. He bounced happily along on the floor of the van as the roads grew worse and the terrain steeper. Osmar chain-smoked and occasionally pointed this way and that. An hour after they grabbed him, they found the last turn. The cabin was in a crevice between two pointed hills, barely visible from the narrow dirt road. They carried him like a sack of meal and poured him onto a table in the den where Guy and the fingerprint man went to work.

Danny Boy snored heavily as prints were made of all eight fingers and both thumbs. The Americans and the Brazilians crowded around, watching every move. There was unopened whiskey in a box by the door, just in case this was the real Danny Boy.

The print man left abruptly and went to a room in the back where he locked the door and spread the fresh prints before him. He adjusted his lighting. He removed the master set, those freely given by Danny Boy when he was much younger, back when he was Patrick and seeking admission to the State Bar of Louisiana. Odd, this fingerprinting of lawyers.

Both sets were in fine shape, and it was immediately obvious they were a perfect match. But he meticulously checked all ten. There was no hurry. Let them wait out there. He rather enjoyed the moment. He finally opened the door and frowned hard at the dozen faces searching his. Then he smiled. "It's him," he said, in English, and they actually clapped.

Guy approved the whiskey, but only in moderation. There was more work to do. Danny Boy, still comatose, was given another shot and carried to a small bedroom with no window and a heavy door which locked from the outside. It was here that he would be interrogated, and tortured, if necessary.

THE BAREFOOT BOYS playing soccer in the street were too involved in their game to look up. Danny Boy's key ring had only four keys on it, and so the small front gate was unlocked quickly, and left open. An accomplice in a rented car came to a stop near a large tree four houses down. Another, on a motorbike, parked himself at the other end of the street and began tinkering with his brakes.

If a security system started howling upon entry, the intruder would simply run and never be seen again. If not, then he would lock himself in and take inventory.

The door opened without sirens. The security panel on the wall informed whoever might be looking that the system was disarmed. He breathed lightly and stood perfectly still for a full minute, then began to move around. He removed the hard drive from Danny Boy's PC, and collected all the disks. He rummaged through files on his desk, but found nothing but routine bills, some paid, others waiting. The fax was cheap and featureless, and declared itself to be out of order. He took photos of clothing, food, furniture, bookshelves, magazine racks.

Five minutes after the door opened, a silent signal was activated in Danilo's attic and a phone call was placed to a private security firm eleven blocks away, in downtown Ponta Porã. The call went unanswered because the security consultant on duty was swaying gently in a hammock out back. A recorded message from Danilo's house informed whoever was supposed to be listening that there was a break-in. Fifteen minutes passed before human ears heard the message. By the time the consultant raced to Danilo's house, the intruder was gone. So was Mr. Silva. Everything appeared to be in order, including the Beetle under the carport. The house and gate were locked.

The directions in the file were specific. On such alarms, do not call the police. Try first to locate Mr. Silva, and in the event he cannot be found at once, then call a number in Rio. Ask for Eva Miranda.

WITH BARELY suppressed excitement, Guy made his daily call to Washington. He actually closed his eyes and smiled when he uttered the words, "It's him." His voice was an octave higher.

There was a pause on the other end. Then, “You’re certain?”

“Yes. Prints are a perfect match.”

Another pause while Stephano arranged his thoughts, a process that usually took milliseconds. “The money?”

“We haven’t started yet. He’s still drugged.”

“When?”

“Tonight.”

“I’m by the phone.” Stephano hung up, though he could’ve talked for hours.

Guy found a perch on a stump behind the cabin. The vegetation was dense, the air thin and cool. The soft voices of happy men drifted up to him. The ordeal was over, for the most part.

He had just earned an extra fifty thousand dollars. Finding the money would mean another bonus, and he was certain he’d find the money.