



THE  
RACKETEER

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A NOVEL

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JOHN  
GRISHAM

THE  
RACKETEER

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**rack-e-teer** one who obtains money illegally, as by fraud, extortion, etc.

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## CHAPTER 1

I am a lawyer, and I am in prison. It's a long story.

I'm forty-three years old and halfway through a ten-year sentence handed down by a weak and sanctimonious federal judge in Washington, D.C. All of my appeals have run their course, and there is no procedure, mechanism, obscure statute, technicality, loophole, or Hail Mary left in my thoroughly depleted arsenal. I have nothing. Because I know the law, I could do what some inmates do and clog up the courts with stacks of worthless motions and writs and other junk filings, but none of this would help my cause. Nothing will help my cause. The reality is that I have no hope of getting out for five more years, save for a few lousy weeks chopped off at the end for good behavior, and my behavior has been exemplary.

I shouldn't call myself a lawyer, because technically I am not. The Virginia State Bar swept in and yanked my license shortly after I was convicted. The language is right there in black and white—a felony conviction equals disbarment. I was stripped of my license, and my disciplinary troubles were duly reported in the *Virginia Lawyer Register*. Three of us were disbarred that month, which is about average.

However, in my little world, I am known as a jailhouse lawyer and as such spend several hours each day helping my fellow inmates with their legal problems. I study their appeals and file motions. I prepare simple wills and an occasional land deed. I review contracts for some of the white-collar guys. I have sued the government for legitimate complaints but never for ones I consider frivolous. And there are a lot of divorces.

Eight months and six days after I began my time, I received a thick envelope. Prisoners crave mail, but this was one package I could have done without. It was from a law firm in Fairfax, Virginia, one that represented my wife, who, surprisingly, wanted a divorce. In a matter of weeks, Dionne had gone from being a supportive wife, dug in for the long haul, to a fleeing victim who desperately wanted out. I couldn't believe it. I read the papers in

absolute shock, my knees rubbery and my eyes wet, and when I was afraid I might start crying, I hustled back to my cell for some privacy. There are a lot of tears in prison, but they are always hidden.

When I left home, Bo was six years old. He was our only child, but we were planning more. The math is easy, and I've done it a million times. He'll be sixteen when I get out, a fully grown teenager, and I will have missed ten of the most precious years a father and son can have. Until they are about twelve years old, little boys worship their fathers and believe they can do no wrong. I coached Bo in T-ball and youth soccer, and he followed me around like a puppy. We fished and camped, and he sometimes went to my office with me on Saturday mornings, after a boys-only breakfast. He was my world, and trying to explain to him that I was going away for a long time broke both our hearts. Once behind bars, I refused to allow him to visit me. As much as I wanted to squeeze him, I could not stand the thought of that little boy seeing his father incarcerated.

It is virtually impossible to fight a divorce when you're in prison and not getting out soon. Our assets, never much to begin with, were depleted after an eighteen-month pounding by the federal government. We had lost everything but our child and our commitment to each other. The child was a rock; the commitment bit the dust. Dionne made some beautiful promises about persevering and toughing it out, but once I was gone, reality set in. She felt lonely and isolated in our small town. "People see me and they whisper," she wrote in one of her first letters. "I'm so lonely," she whined in another. It wasn't long before the letters became noticeably shorter and further apart. As did the visits.

Dionne grew up in Philadelphia and never warmed to life in the country. When an uncle offered her a job, she was suddenly in a hurry to go home. She remarried two years ago, and Bo, now eleven, is being coached by another father. My last twenty letters to my son went unanswered. I'm sure he never saw them.

I often wonder if I will see him again. I think I will make the effort, though I vacillate on this. How do you confront a child you love so much it hurts but who will not recognize you? We are never going to live together again as a typical father and son. Would it be fair to Bo to have his long-lost father reappear and insist on becoming part of his life?

I have far too much time to think about this.



I am inmate number 44861-127 at the Federal Prison Camp near Frostburg, Maryland. A “camp” is a low-security facility for those of us who are deemed nonviolent and sentenced to ten years or less. For reasons that were never made clear, my first twenty-two months were spent at a medium-security joint near Louisville, Kentucky. In the endless alphabet muck of bureau-speak, it is known as an FCI—Federal Correctional Institution—and it was a far different place than my camp at Frostburg. An FCI is for violent men sentenced to more than ten years. Life there is much tougher, though I survived without being physically assaulted. Being a former Marine helped immensely.

As far as prisons go, a camp is a resort. There are no walls, fences, razor wire, or lookout towers and only a few guards with guns. Frostburg is relatively new, and its facilities are nicer than most public high schools. And why not? In the United States we spend \$40,000 a year to incarcerate each prison inmate and \$8,000 to educate each elementary school student. Here we have counselors, managers, caseworkers, nurses, secretaries, assistants of many varieties, and dozens of administrators who would be hard-pressed to truthfully explain how they fill their eight hours each day. It is, after all, the federal government. The employee parking lot near the front entrance is packed with nice cars and trucks.

There are six hundred inmates here at Frostburg, and, with a few exceptions, we are a well-behaved group of men. Those with violent pasts have learned their lessons and appreciate their civilized surroundings. Those who’ve spent their lives in prison have finally found the best home. Many of these career boys do not want to leave. They are thoroughly institutionalized and cannot function on the outside. A warm bed, three meals a day, health care—how could they possibly top this out there on the streets?

I’m not implying this is a pleasant place. It is not. There are many men like me who never dreamed they would one day fall so hard. Men with professions, careers, businesses; men with assets and nice families and country-club memberships. In my White Gang there is Carl, an optometrist who tinkered too much with his Medicare billings; and Kermit, a land speculator who double and triple pledged the same properties to various banks; and Wesley, a former Pennsylvania state senator who took a bribe; and Mark, a small-town mortgage lender who cut some corners.

Carl, Kermit, Wesley, and Mark. All white, average age of fifty-one. All admit their guilt.

Then there's me. Malcolm Bannister, black, aged forty-three, convicted of a crime I had no knowledge of committing.

At this moment, at Frostburg, I happen to be the only black guy serving time for a white-collar crime. Some distinction.

In my Black Gang, the membership is not so clearly defined. Most are kids from the streets of D.C. and Baltimore who were busted for drug-related crimes, and when they are paroled, they will return to the streets with a 20 percent chance of avoiding another conviction. With no education, no skills, and a criminal record, how are they supposed to succeed?

In reality, there are no gangs in a federal camp and no violence. If you fight or threaten someone, they'll yank you out of here and send you to a place that's far worse. There is a lot of bickering, mainly over the television, but I have yet to see someone throw a punch. Some of these guys have served time in state prisons, and the stories they tell are horrifying. No one wants to trade this place for another joint.

So we behave as we count the days. For the white-collar guys, the punishment is humiliation and the loss of status, standing, a lifestyle. For the black guys, life in a camp is safer than where they came from and where they're going. Their punishment is another notch on their criminal records, another step in becoming career felons.

Because of this, I feel more white than black.

There are two other ex-lawyers here at Frostburg. Ron Napoli was a flamboyant criminal lawyer in Philadelphia for many years, until cocaine ruined him. He specialized in drug law and represented many of the top dealers and traffickers in the mid-Atlantic region, from New Jersey to the Carolinas. He preferred to get paid in cash and coke and eventually lost everything. The IRS nailed him for tax evasion, and he's about halfway through a nine-year sentence. Ron's not doing too well these days. He seems depressed and will not, under any circumstances, exercise and try to take care of himself. He's getting heavier, slower, crankier, and sicker. He used to tell fascinating stories about his clients and their adventures in narco-trafficking, but now he just sits in the yard, eating bag after bag of

Fritos and looking lost. Someone is sending him money, and he spends most of it on junk food.

The third ex-lawyer is a Washington shark named Amos Kapp, a longtime insider and shifty operator who spent a career slinking around the edges of every major political scandal. Kapp and I were tried together, convicted together, and sentenced ten years apiece by the same judge. There were eight defendants—seven from Washington and me. Kapp has always been guilty of something, and he was certainly guilty in the eyes of our jurors. Kapp, though, knew then and knows now that I had nothing to do with the conspiracy, but he was too much of a coward and a crook to say anything. Violence is strictly prohibited at Frostburg, but give me five minutes with Amos Kapp and his neck would be broken. He knows this, and I suspect he told the warden a long time ago. They keep him on the west campus, as far away from my pod as possible.

Of the three lawyers, I'm the only one willing to help other inmates with their legal problems. I enjoy the work. It's challenging and keeps me busy. It also keeps my legal skills sharp, though I doubt if I have much of a future as a lawyer. I can apply for reinstatement to the bar when I'm out, but that can be an arduous procedure. The truth is I never made any money as a lawyer. I was a small-town practitioner, black on top of that, and few clients could pay a decent fee. There were dozens of other lawyers packed along Braddock Street scrambling for the same clients; the competition was rough. I'm not sure what I'll do when this is over, but I have serious doubts about resuming a legal career.

I'll be forty-eight, single, and in good health, hopefully.

Five years is an eternity. Every day I take a long walk, alone, on a dirt jogging trail that skirts the edges of the camp and follows the boundary, or the "line," as it is known. Step over the line, and you're considered an escapee. In spite of being the site of a prison, this is beautiful country with spectacular views. As I walk and gaze at the rolling hills in the distance, I fight the urge to just keep walking, to step over the line. There is no fence to stop me, no guard to yell my name. I could disappear into the dense woods, then disappear forever.

I wish there was a wall, one ten feet tall, made of solid brick, with coils of glistening razor wire along its top, one that would keep me from gazing

at the hills and dreaming of freedom. This is a prison, damn it! We can't leave. Put up a wall and stop tempting us.

The temptation is always there, and, as much as I fight it, I swear it's getting stronger by the day.