



JOHN

GRISHAM



SPARRING  
PARTNERS



## ALSO BY JOHN GRISHAM

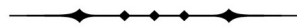
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DOUBLEDAY  
New York

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# *HOMECOMING*



(1)

It was one of those raw, windy, dreary Monday afternoons in February when gloom settled over the land and seasonal depression was rampant. Court was not in session. The phone wasn't ringing. Petty criminals and other potential clients were busy elsewhere with no thoughts whatsoever of hiring lawyers. The occasional caller was more likely to be a man or woman still reeling from holiday overspending and seeking advice about unpaid credit card accounts. Those were quickly sent next door, or across the square, or anywhere.

Jake was at his desk upstairs, making little progress with the stack of paperwork he'd been neglecting for weeks, even months. With no court or hearings scheduled for days, it should have been a good time to catch up with the old stuff—the fish files that every lawyer had for some reason said yes to a year ago and now just wanted to go away. The upside of a small-town law practice, especially in your hometown, was that everyone knew your name, and that was what you wanted. It was important to be well thought of and well liked, with a good reputation. When your neighbors got in trouble, you wanted to be the man they called. The downside was that their cases were always mundane and rarely profitable. But, you couldn't say no. The gossip was fierce and unrelenting, and a lawyer who turned his back on his friends would not last long.

His funk was interrupted when Alicia, his current part-time secretary, chimed in through his desk phone. “Jake, there's a couple here to see you.”

A couple. Married but wanting to get unmarried. Another cheap divorce. He glanced at his daily planner though he knew there was nothing.

“Do they have an appointment?” he asked, but only to remind Alicia that she shouldn't be bothering him with the foot traffic.

“No. But they're very nice and they say it's really urgent. They're not going away, said it wouldn't take but a few minutes.”



Jake loathed being bullied in his own office. On a busier day he would take a stand and get rid of them. “Do they appear to have any money?” The answer was always no.

“Well, they do seem rather affluent.”

Affluent? In Ford County. Somewhat intriguing.

Alicia continued, “They’re from Memphis and just passing through, but, again, they say it’s very important.”

“Any idea what it is?”

“No.”

Well, it wouldn’t be a divorce if they lived in Memphis. He ran through a list of possibilities—Grandma’s will, some old family land, maybe a kid busted for drugs over at Ole Miss. Since he was bored and mildly curious and needed an excuse to avoid the paperwork, he asked, “Did you tell them that I’m tied up in a settlement conference call with a dozen lawyers?”

“No.”

“Did you tell them I’m due in federal court over in Oxford and can only spare a moment or two?”

“No.”

“Did you tell them that I’m slammed with other appointments?”

“No. It’s pretty obvious the place is empty and the phone isn’t ringing.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m in the kitchen, so I can talk.”

“Okay, okay. Make some fresh coffee and put ’em in the conference room. I’ll be down in ten minutes.”

## (2)

The first thing Jake noticed was their tans. They had obviously been somewhere in the sun. No one else in Clanton had a tan in February. The second thing he noticed was the woman’s smart short haircut, with a touch of gray, stylish and obviously expensive. He noticed the handsome sports

coat on the gentleman. Both were well dressed and nicely groomed, a departure from the usual walk-ins.

He shook their hands as he got their names. Gene and Kathy Roupp, from Memphis. Late fifties, quite pleasant, with confident smiles showing rows of well-maintained teeth. Jake could easily picture them on a Florida golf course living the good life behind gates and guards.

“What can I do for you folks?” Jake asked.

Gene flashed a smile and went first. “Well, sad to say, but we’re not here as potential clients.”

Jake kept it loose with a fake smile and an aw-shucks shrug, as if to say, *What the hell? What lawyer needs to get paid for his time?* He’d give them about ten more minutes and one cup before showing them the door.

“We just got back from a month in Costa Rica, one of our favorites. Ever been to Costa Rica?”

“No. I hear it’s great.” He’d heard nothing of the sort but what else could he say? He would never admit that he had left the United States exactly once in his thirty-eight years. Foreign travel was only a dream.

“We love it down there, a real paradise. Beautiful beaches, mountains, rain forests, great food. We have some friends who own houses—real estate is pretty cheap. The people are delightful, educated, almost all speak English.”

Jake loathed the game of travel trivia because he’d never been anywhere. The local doctors were the worst—always bragging about the hottest new resorts.

Kathy was itching to move along the narrative and chimed in with “The golf is incredible, so many fabulous courses.”

Jake didn’t play golf because he was not a member of the Clanton Country Club. Its membership included too many doctors and climbers and families with old money.

He smiled and nodded at her and waited for one of them to continue. From a bag he couldn’t see she whipped out a pound of coffee in a shiny can and said, “Here’s a little gift, San Pedro Select, our favorite. Incredible. We haul it back by the case.”

Jake took it to be polite. In lieu of cash fees, he had been paid with watermelons, fresh venison, firewood, repairs to his cars, and more bartered goods and services than he cared to remember. His best lawyer buddy, Harry Rex Vonner, had once taken a John Deere mower as a fee, though it soon broke down. Another lawyer, one who was no longer practicing, had taken sexual favors from a divorce client. When he lost the case, she filed an ethics complaint alleging “substandard performance.”

Anyway, Jake admired the can and tried to read the Spanish. He noticed they had not touched their coffee, and he was suddenly worried that perhaps they were connoisseurs and his office brew wasn’t quite up to their standards.

Gene resumed with “So, two weeks ago we were at one of our favorite eco-lodges, high in the mountains, deep in the rain forest, a small place with only thirty rooms, incredible views.”

How many times might they use the word “incredible”?

“And we were having breakfast outdoors, watching the spider monkeys and parakeets, when a waiter stopped by our table to pour some more coffee. He was very friendly—”

“People are so friendly down there and they love Americans,” Kathy interjected.

How could they not?

Gene nodded at the interruption and continued, “We chatted him up for a spell, said his name was Jason and that he was from Florida, been living down there for twenty years. We saw him again at lunch and talked to him some more. We saw him around after that and always enjoyed a friendly chat. The day before we were to check out, he asked us to join him for a glass of champagne in a little tree-house bar. He was off-duty and said the drinks were on him. The sunsets over the mountains are incredible, and we were having a good time, when all of a sudden he got serious.”

Gene paused and looked at Kathy, who was ready to pounce with “He said he had something to tell us, something very confidential. Said his name was not really Jason and he wasn’t from Florida. He apologized for not

being truthful. Said his name was really Mack Stafford, and that he was from Clanton, Mississippi.”

Jake tried to remain nonchalant but it was impossible. His mouth dropped open and his eyes widened.

The Roupps were watching closely for his reaction. Gene said, “I take it you know Mack Stafford.”

Jake exhaled and wasn’t sure what to say. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

“He said you guys were old friends,” Gene added.

Stunned, Jake was still grasping for words. “I’m just glad he’s alive.”

“So you know him well?”

“Oh yes, quite well.”

### (3)

Three years earlier, the town was rocked with the scandalous news that Mack Stafford, a well-known lawyer on the square, had cracked up, filed for bankruptcy, divorced his wife, and left his family in the middle of the night. The gossip raged for weeks, with all manner of tales spinning off wildly, and when the dust began to settle it appeared that most of the rumors were actually true, for a change.

Mack practiced street law for seventeen years and Jake knew him well. He was a decent lawyer with a passable reputation. Like most of them, he handled the routine business of those clients who walked through his door, and barely managed to keep his head above water. His wife, Lisa, was an assistant principal at Clanton High School and earned a steady salary. Her father owned the only ready-mix plant in the county, and that placed her family a notch or two above the others, but still a considerable distance below the doctors. Lisa was nice enough but a bit on the snooty side, and for that reason Jake and Carla had never socialized with them.

After Mack disappeared, and it became obvious that he had indeed vanished without a trace, word leaked from somewhere that he had left town with some money that wasn’t exactly his. Lisa got everything in the

divorce, though the couple's liabilities almost equaled their assets. Mack dumped his files and clients and legal troubles on Harry Rex, who whispered to Jake that he had been paid in cash for his troubles, and Mack left some money behind for Lisa and their two daughters. Lisa had no idea where it came from.

The fact that he had so successfully disappeared only fueled the speculation that he had done something wrong, and stealing clients' money was the most likely scenario. Every lawyer handled his clients' money, if only for brief periods of time, and the quickest and most common route to disbarment was pilfering a bit here and there. There was no shortage of legendary cases where lawyers succumbed to temptation and looted entire trust funds, guardianship accounts, and settlement pools. They usually tried to hide for a while but all were caught, stripped of their licenses, and sent to prison.

But Mack was never caught, nor was he heard from. As the months passed, Jake asked Harry Rex, always over a beer, if he had heard from Mack. He most certainly had not, and among the local lawyers the legend grew. Mack pulled off the great escape. He left behind an unhappy marriage, a dismal career, and was on a beach somewhere, sipping rum. Or at least that was the fantasy among the lawyers he left behind.

#### (4)

Kathy said, "We got the impression he did something wrong around here, but he never mentioned it. I mean, you gotta figure a guy like him, living in some exotic place down there, using an alias, and so on, had a pretty colorful past. But, again, he didn't give us much."

Gene said, "When we got home we did some digging and found a couple of stories in the local newspapers, but it was pretty general stuff. His divorce, bankruptcy, and the fact that he was gone."

Kathy asked, "Can we ask you, Mr. Brigance, did Mack do something wrong? Is he on the run?"

Jake wasn't about to confide in these strangers, two nice people he would probably never see again. The truth was that Jake didn't know for sure that Mack had committed a crime. He deflected the question with "I don't think so. It's no crime to divorce and leave town."

The answer was completely unsatisfactory. It hung in the air for a few seconds, then Gene leaned in a bit closer and asked, "Did we do anything wrong by talking to him?"

"Of course not."

"Aiding and abetting, something like that?"

"No way. Not a chance. Relax."

They took a deep breath.

Jake said, "The bigger question is: Why are you here?"

They exchanged knowing little smiles and Kathy reached into her bag. She withdrew a plain, unmarked, unstamped manila envelope, five-by-eight, and handed it to Jake, who took it with suspicion. The flap had been sealed with glue, tape, and staples.

Gene said, "Mack asked us to stop by and say hello, and tell you that he sends his greetings. And he asked us to deliver this. We have no idea what it is."

Kathy was nervous again and asked, "This is okay, right? We're not involved in anything, are we?"

"Of course not. No one will ever know."

"He said you could be trusted."

"I can." Jake wasn't sure what he was being asked in trust, but he didn't want to worry them.

Gene handed him a scrap of paper and said, "This is our phone number in Memphis. Mack wants you to call us in a few days and say, simply, yes or no. That's all. Just yes or no."

"Okay." Jake took the scrap of paper and placed it next to the envelope and the pound of coffee. Kathy finally took a sip from her cup and remained expressionless.

They had completed their mission and were ready to go. Jake assured them that everything would be held in the strictest of confidence and that he

would tell no one about their meeting. He walked them to the front door and outside onto the sidewalk, and he watched them get into a shiny BMW sedan and drive away.

Then he hustled back to the conference room, closed the door, and opened the envelope.

(5)

The letter was typed on one sheet of plain white paper, tri-folded, with a smaller envelope stuck in the fold.

It read:

*Hello, Jake. By now, you've met my two newest best friends, Gene and Kathy Roupp, of Memphis. Fine folks. I'll cut to the chase. I want to talk to you, down here in Costa Rica. I want to come home, Jake, but I'm not sure that's possible. I need your help. I'm asking you and Carla to take a little vacation and come see me, next month during spring break. I assume Carla is still teaching and I assume the schools take their normal spring break the second week of March. I'll arrange six nights at the Terra Lodge, a splendid eco-tourist resort in the mountains. You'll love this place. Enclosed is \$1800 in cash, more than enough for two round-trip tickets from Memphis to San Jose, Costa Rica. From there, I'll have a car waiting to bring you here. It's about three hours and the drive is beautiful. Rooms, meals, tours, everything is on me. The dream vacation of a lifetime. Once you get here, I'll eventually find you and we'll talk. Privacy is my specialty these days and I assure you no one will ever know about our meeting. The less said about the vacation the better. I know how people love to talk around that awful town.*

*Please do this, Jake. It will be well worth your time, if for nothing else than an unforgettable trip.*

*Lisa is not well. Okay to discuss this with Harry Rex, but please swear that loudmouth to secrecy.*

*I will not do anything to jeopardize your well-being.*

*Think it over. In a few days, call Gene and say either "Yes" or "No."*

*I need you, pal.*

*Mack*

The small envelope contained a slick brochure from the Terra Lodge.

## (6)

The most dangerous place in downtown Clanton on a Monday was undoubtedly the law office of Harry Rex Vonner. With a well-earned reputation as the nastiest divorce lawyer in the county, he attracted clients with assets worth fighting over. Monday was volatile for various reasons: bad behavior on Saturday night, or too much time in the house arguing over this and that, or even another explosive Sunday lunch with the in-laws. There was no shortage of detonators, and the frazzled and warring spouses rushed to get legal counsel as soon as possible. By noon, the place was a tinderbox as the phones rang nonstop and litigants, both current and brand-new, dropped by with and without appointments. The harried secretaries tried to maintain order as Harry Rex either stomped around, growling at everyone, or hid in his bunker-like office out of the fray. It was not unusual for him, on a Monday, to storm out of his back room and order someone, client or otherwise, to get the hell out.

They always complied because he had a reputation for unpredictability. It, too, was well earned. A few years earlier, a secretary had rushed into his office and said she had just hung up on a husband who was headed into town, with a gun. Harry Rex went to his closet, and from his impressive arsenal chose his favorite, a Browning 12-gauge, pump-action shotgun. When the husband parked his truck near the courthouse and started for the



office, Harry Rex emerged onto the sidewalk and fired two shots into the clouds. The husband retreated to his truck and left. The blasts boomed like howitzers over the square. Offices and stores emptied as folks scurried to see what was going on. Someone called the police. By the time Sheriff Ozzie Walls parked in front of the office, a crowd had gathered on the courthouse lawn, a safe distance away. Ozzie went inside and met with Harry Rex. Discharging a firearm in public was a crime all right, but in a culture where the Second Amendment was revered and every vehicle had at least two firearms, the statute was rarely enforced. Harry Rex claimed self-defense and vowed to aim lower next time.

After dark on Monday, Jake eased around the square and, avoiding the chaos in the front, ducked into an alley and entered the office through the rear door. Harry Rex was at his desk, rumpled and wrinkled as always, his tie undone, food stains on his shirt, his hair a mess. He actually smiled and asked, “What the hell are you doin’ here?”

Jake said, “We need to split a beer.”

It was code for: *We need to talk, and now, and it’s top secret.* Harry Rex closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “What is it?” he asked in a low tone.

“Mack Stafford.”

Another deep breath, then a look of disbelief.

Jake said, “Meet me at the Riviera at eight.”

At home, Jake kissed, hugged, and pestered Carla as she put a chicken in the oven and prepared dinner. He went upstairs and found Hanna busy with her homework. He went to Luke’s room and found him playing quietly under his bed. Back in the kitchen, he asked his wife to have a seat at the breakfast table and handed her the letter. As she read it, she began shaking her head and tapping her teeth with a painted fingernail, an old habit that could mean several things.

“What a creep.”

“I always liked Mack.”

“He left his wife and kids and disappeared. And didn’t he steal some money from his clients?”

“That’s the legend. He vanished three years ago, but he didn’t really leave his wife. They were getting a divorce. Is she sick?”

“Come on, Jake. Lisa’s had breast cancer for a year now. You knew that.”

“I must have forgotten. There’s so much cancer. She was never your favorite, as I recall.”

“No, she wasn’t.” Carla looked at the letter again. “Check those potatoes.”

Jake walked to the stove and stirred a pot of boiling potatoes. He filled a glass with water and returned to the table.

She asked, “Why does he want you? Wasn’t Harry Rex his lawyer?”

“He was, guess he still is. Maybe it’s because Harry Rex is afraid of flying and Mack knew he wouldn’t make the trip. There’s nothing wrong with going down, I mean, nothing illegal.”

“You’re not serious.”

“Why not? An all-expenses-paid week at a fancy resort in the mountains.”

“No.”

“Come on, Carla. We haven’t had a real vacation in years.”

“We’ve never had a real vacation, like, you know, getting on a plane and flying off somewhere.”

“Exactly. This is the chance of a lifetime.”

“No.”

“Why not? The guy needs help. He wants to come home and, I don’t know, maybe make things right with his family. There’s no harm in going down and meeting with him. Mack’s a nice guy.”

“He has two daughters that he left behind.”

“He did, and that’s terrible. But maybe he wants to make amends. Let’s give the guy a break.”

“Is he a fugitive?”

“I’m not sure. I’m meeting with Harry Rex at eight and I have some questions. The rumor was that Mack took a bunch of money and left town, but I don’t recall hearing about an indictment or anything like that. He filed

for bankruptcy and divorce and vanished. Most of the lawyers in town were envious. Not me, of course.”

“Of course not. I remember all the gossip. The town talked of nothing else for months.”

Jake slid across the brochure and she took it.

## (7)

The Riviera was a small 1950s-style motel at the edge of town. It had two wings of tiny rooms, some rumored to be available by the hour, and a dingy bar where lawyers and bankers and businessmen hid to discuss things that could not be overheard. Jake hadn't been there in years and got a few looks as he walked in. He smiled at the bartender, ordered two draft beers, and took them to a table near the jukebox. He sipped one for fifteen minutes as he waited. Harry Rex was always late, especially for drinks. Getting him to the bar, though, was the easy part. Getting him out of one was usually a challenge. Things were not going well with his third wife and he preferred to stay away from home.

He lumbered in at 8:20 and spoke to three gentlemen at a table as he passed by. At times, it seemed as though he knew everyone.

He fell into a chair across from Jake, grabbed his mug, and drained half of it. Jake knew it wasn't his first beer of the evening. He kept a fridge filled with Bud Light in his office and popped a top each evening after the last client left.

“Poachin' my clients again, huh?” he said.

“Hardly. I doubt if Mack's looking for a new lawyer.”

“Tell me what you know.”

“He left town, what, three years ago? Any word from him since then?”

“Not a peep. Nothing. The last time I spoke to Mack he was in my office lookin' at the divorce papers. Gave her everything, includin' fifty thousand in cash. That's in the settlement. Nash was her lawyer, told me later that they'd never had fifty thousand in cash, nowhere close to that. He

talked to Freda, his old secretary, and she had no idea where the money came from. Said they could barely pay the bills most months.”

“So, where did the money come from?”

“Slow down.” Another gulp. “This beer’s hot. How long’s it been sittin’ here?”

“Well, I bought it when I arrived promptly at eight, the agreed-upon hour. So, yes, it’s not as cold as it was.”

Harry Rex unfolded himself, walked to the bar, and ordered two more drafts. He set them on the table and said, “So, he’s contacted you?”

“Yep.” Jake told the story about Gene and Kathy Roupp and their surprise visit earlier in the day. He handed over the letter and Harry Rex read it slowly. He paused and said, “You know Lisa’s got breast cancer. Nash told me months ago.”

“Yes.”

Jake rarely bothered to chase gossip. He had Harry Rex to rely on.

He finished reading and took a drink. “Wonder why he didn’t offer *me* a nice vacation.”

“Could be the airplane thing.”

“That, plus I can’t imagine goin’ anywhere with Millie for a week. You takin’ the deal?”

“Carla says no, but she’ll come around. There’s no harm, right?”

“I don’t see a problem. He ain’t exactly a fugitive.”

“But I recall something about the grand jury poking around.”

“That’s right. I thought things might get hairy when the DA was askin’ questions. Hell, even the FBI stopped by to see me a couple of times.”

“You never told me that.”

“Jake, my friend, there are a lot of things you don’t know.”

“So, where’d the money come from?”

“I have no idea, really. Mack was always desperate to make some money because his law practice was a dead end and his wife had bigger dreams.”

“And he paid you?”