

JOHN
GRISHAM

— A NOVEL —

THE
BOYS FROM
BILOXI



ALSO BY JOHN GRISHAM

A Time to Kill
The Firm
The Pelican Brief
The Client
The Chamber
The Rainmaker
The Runaway Jury
The Partner
The Street Lawyer
The Testament
The Brethren
A Painted House
Skipping Christmas
The Summons
The King of Torts
Bleachers
The Last Juror
The Broker
The Innocent Man
Playing for Pizza
The Appeal
The Associate
Ford County
The Confession
The Litigators
Calico Joe
The Racketeer
Sycamore Row
Gray Mountain
Rogue Lawyer
The Whistler
Camino Island
The Rooster Bar
The Reckoning
The Guardians
Camino Winds
A Time for Mercy
Sooley
The Judge's List
Sparring Partners

The Theodore Boone Books

Theodore Boone: Kid Lawyer

Theodore Boone: The Abduction

Theodore Boone: The Accused

Theodore Boone: The Activist

Theodore Boone: The Fugitive

Theodore Boone: The Scandal

Theodore Boone: The Accomplice

JOHN
GRISHAM



THE BOYS
FROM BILOXI



DOUBLEDAY

New York

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2022 by Belfry Holdings, Inc.

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Doubleday, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York, and distributed in Canada by Penguin Random House Canada Limited, Toronto.

www.doubleday.com

DOUBLEDAY and the portrayal of an anchor with a dolphin are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Cover design by Michael J. Windsor

Cover photographs: (people) © Massimo Volonte / Millennium Images, U.K.; (seascape) © Carmen K. Sisson / Cloudybright / Alamy; (grass) © A-Digit / DigitalVision Vectors / Getty; (clouds) © Nguyen Trong Bao Toan / Moment / Getty Images

Library of Congress Control Number 2022942560
ISBN 9780385548922 (hardcover)
ISBN 9780385548939 (ebook)

ep_prh_6.0_141656613_c0_r2

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Also by John Grisham](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[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](#)

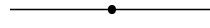
[Chapter 57](#)

[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.

CHAPTER 3

When Hugh's grandfather got off the boat in New Orleans in 1912 he was sixteen years old and spoke almost no English. He could pronounce "Biloxi" and that was all the customs official needed. The boats were filled with Eastern Europeans, many with relatives along the Mississippi coast, and customs was eager to move those folks along and send them somewhere else. Biloxi was a favorite destination.

The kid's name, back in Croatia, was Oron Malokovic, another mouthful. Some customs officials were patient and worked tediously to record the correct names. Others were hurried, impatient, or indifferent, or maybe they felt as though they were doing the immigrant a favor by renaming him or her with something that might adapt easier in the new country. In all fairness, some of the names from "over there" were difficult for English speakers to pronounce. New Orleans and the Gulf Coast had a rich history dominated by French and Spanish, and by the 1800s those languages had melted easily into the English. But the consonant-laden Slavic tongues were another matter.

At any rate, Oron became Aaron Malco, an identity he reluctantly embraced because he had no choice. Armed with new paperwork, he hustled up to Biloxi where a relative arranged a room in a barracks and a job shucking oysters in an "oyster house." Like his countrymen, he eked out a living, worked as many long, hard hours as possible, and saved a few bucks. After two years, he found a better job building schooners in a shipyard on Biloxi's Back Bay. The work paid more but was physically demanding. Now fully grown, Aaron stood over six feet tall, was thick through the shoulders, and manhandled massive timbers that usually required two or three other men. He endeared himself to his bosses and was given his own crew, along with a pay raise. At the age of nineteen, he was earning fifty cents an hour, a top wage, and worked as many hours as the company offered him.

When Aaron was twenty, he married Lida Simonovich, a seventeen-year-old Croatian girl who had been fortunate enough to be born in the U.S. Her mother had given birth two months after she and her father arrived on the boat from Europe. Lida worked in a cannery and in her spare time helped her mother, a seamstress. The young couple moved into a rented shotgun house on the Point where they were surrounded by family and friends, all from the old country.

Their dreams were dashed eight months after their wedding when Aaron fell from a scaffold. A broken arm and leg would heal, but the crushed vertebrae in his lower back rendered him a near cripple. For months he convalesced at home and slowly regained his ability to walk. Out of work, the couple survived with the endless support of their family and neighbors. Meals were abundant, rent was paid, and the parish priest, Father Herbert, stopped by every day for prayers, both in English and Croatian. With the aid of a cane, one that he would never be able to fully abandon, in spite of his heroic efforts, Aaron began the difficult task of looking for work.

A distant cousin owned one of three corner grocery stores on the Point. He took pity on Aaron and offered him a job sweeping floors, stocking goods, and eventually operating the cash register. Before long, Aaron ran the place and business improved. He knew all the customers, and their children and grandparents, and would do anything to help a person in need. He upgraded the inventory, discontinued items that rarely sold, and expanded the store. Even when it was closed, he would fetch items for customers and deliver them to their homes on an old delivery bike. With Aaron in charge, his boss decided to open a dry-goods store two blocks over.

Aaron saw an opportunity with another expansion. He convinced his boss to rent the building next door and establish a bar. It was 1920, the country was in the grips of Prohibition and the Catholic immigrants in Biloxi were thirstier than ever. Aaron cut a deal with a local bootlegger and stocked his bar with an impressive variety of beers, even some from Europe, and a dozen brands of popular Irish whiskeys.

He opened the grocery store each morning at sunrise and offered strong coffee and Croatian pastries to the fishermen and cannery workers.

Late each night, Lida baked a tray of krostules, oil-fried cakes sprinkled with powdered sugar, and they became immensely popular with the early crowd. Through the mornings, Aaron hustled about on his cane, working the counter, cutting meats, stocking shelves, sweeping floors, and tending to the needs of his customers. Late in the afternoons, he opened the bar and welcomed his regulars. When he wasn't serving drinks he scurried back to the store, which he closed after the last customer, usually around seven. From then on he was behind the bar pouring drinks, bantering with friends, telling jokes, and spreading gossip. He usually closed around eleven, when the last shift of cannery workers finally called it a night.

In 1922, Lida and Aaron welcomed their first child and blessed him with the proper American name of Lance. A daughter and another son soon followed. Their shotgun house was crowded, and Aaron convinced his boss to rent him an unfinished space upstairs over the bar and grocery store. The family moved in while a crew of carpenters erected walls and built a kitchen. Aaron's sixteen-hour days became even longer. Lida quit her job to raise the family and also to work in the grocery.

In 1925, his boss died suddenly of a heart attack. Aaron disliked his widow and saw no future under her thumb. He convinced her to sell him the bar and grocery store, and for \$1,000 cash and a promissory note, he became the owner. The note was paid off in two years, and Aaron opened another bar on the west side of the Point. With two popular bars and a busy grocery store, the Malcos became more prosperous than most of the immigrant families, though they did nothing to show it. They worked harder than ever, saved their money, stayed in the same upstairs apartment, and went about their ways as thrifty and frugal immigrants. They were quick to help others and Aaron often made small loans to friends when the banks said no. They were generous with the church and never missed Sunday Mass.

Their children worked in the store as soon as they were old enough. At the age of seven, Lance was a fixture on the Point, riding his bike with a basket filled with groceries for home deliveries. At ten, he was sliding cold bottles of beer across the bar and keeping tabs on the customers.

Early in his business career, Aaron witnessed the darker side of gambling and wanted no part of it. Illegality aside, he chose not to allow