

'The Brethren'

by John Grisham

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(CNN) -- Readers have been clamoring for the latest John Grisham novel. Now you can begin reading it here.

The story begins at Trumble, where a scam run by three jailed former judges ensnares the wrong victim, an innocent on the outside, a man with dangerous friends. For the judges, the days of quietly marking time are over.

CHAPTER ONE

For the weekly docket the court jester wore his standard garb of well-used and deeply faded maroon pajamas and lavender terry-cloth shower shoes with no socks. He wasn't the only inmate who went about his daily business in his pajamas, but no one else dared wear lavender shoes. His name was T. Karl, and he'd once owned banks in Boston.

The pajamas and shoes weren't nearly as troubling as the wig. It parted at the middle and rolled in layers downward, over his ears, with tight curls coiling off into three directions, and fell heavily onto his shoulders. It was a bright gray, almost white, and fashioned after the Old English magistrate's wigs from centuries earlier. A friend on the outside had found it at a secondhand costume store in Manhattan, in the Village.

T. Karl wore it to court with great pride, and, odd as it was, it had, with time, become part of the show. The other inmates kept their distance from T. Karl anyway, wig or not.

He stood behind his flimsy folding table in the prison cafeteria, tapped a plastic mallet that served as a gavel, cleared his squeaky throat, and announced with great dignity: "Hear ye, hear ye, hear ye. The Inferior Federal Court of North Florida is now in session. Please rise." No one moved, or at least no one made an effort to stand. Thirty inmates lounged in various stages of repose in plastic cafeteria chairs, some looking at the court jester, some chatting away as if he didn't exist. T. Karl continued: "Let all ye who search for justice draw nigh and get screwed."

No laughs. It had been funny months earlier when T. Karl first tried it. Now it was just another part of the show. He sat down carefully, making sure the rows of curls bouncing upon his shoulders were given ample chance to be seen, then he opened a thick red leather book which served as the official record for the court. He took his work very seriously. Three men entered the room from the kitchen. Two of them wore shoes. One was eating a saltine. The one with no shoes was also bare-legged up to his knees, so that below his robe his spindly legs could be seen. They were smooth and hairless and very brown from the sun. A large tattoo had been applied to his left calf. He was from California. All three wore old church robes from the same choir, pale green with gold trim. They came from the same store as T. Karl's wig, and had been presented by him as gifts at Christmas. That was how he kept his job as the court's official clerk.

There were a few hisses and jeers from the spectators as the judges ambled across the tile floor, in full regalia, their robes flowing. They took their places behind a long folding table, near T. Karl but not too near, and faced the weekly gathering. The short round one sat in the middle. Joe Roy Spicer was his name, and by default he acted as the Chief Justice of the tribunal. In his previous life, Judge Spicer had been a Justice of the Peace in Mississippi, duly elected by the people of his little county, and sent away when the feds caught him skimming bingo profits from a Shriners club.

"Please be seated," he said. Not a soul was standing.

The judges adjusted their folding chairs and shook their robes until they fell properly around them. The assistant warden stood to the side, ignored by the inmates. A guard in uniform was with him. The Brethren met once a week with the prison's approval. They heard cases, mediated disputes, settled little fights among the boys, and had generally proved to be a stabilizing factor amid the population.

Spicer looked at the docket, a neat hand-printed sheet of paper prepared by T. Karl, and said, "Court shall come to order."

To his right was the Californian, the Honorable Finn Yarber, age sixty, in for two years now with five to go for income tax evasion. A vendetta, he still maintained to anyone who would listen. A crusade by a Republican governor who'd managed to rally the voters in a recall drive to remove Chief Justice Yarber from the California Supreme Court. The rallying point had been Yarber's opposition to the death penalty, and his high-handedness in delaying every execution. Folks wanted blood, Yarber prevented it, the Republicans whipped up a frenzy, and the recall was a smashing success. They pitched him onto the street, where he floundered for a while until the IRS began asking questions. Educated at Stanford, indicted in Sacramento, sentenced in San Francisco, and now serving his time at a federal prison in Florida.

In for two years and Finn was still struggling with the bitterness. He still believed in his own innocence, still dreamed of conquering his enemies. But the dreams were fading. He spent a lot of time on the jogging track, alone, basking in the sun and dreaming of another life. "First case is Schneiter versus Magruder," Spicer announced as if a major antitrust trial was about to start.

"Schneiter's not here," Beech said.

"Where is he?"

"Infirmary. Gallstones again. I just left there."

Hatlee Beech was the third member of the tribunal. He spent most of his time in the infirmary because of hemorrhoids, or headaches, or swollen glands. Beech was fifty-six, the youngest of the three, and with nine years to go he was convinced he would die in prison. He'd been a federal judge in East Texas, a hardfisted conservative who knew lots of Scripture and liked to quote it during trials. He'd had political ambitions, a nice family, money from his wife's family's oil trust. He also had a drinking problem which no one knew about until he ran over two hikers in Yellowstone. Both died. The car

Beech had been driving was owned by a young lady he was not married to. She was found naked in the front seat, too drunk to walk.

They sent him away for twelve years.

Joe Roy Spicer, Finn Yarber, Hatlee Beech. The Inferior Court of North Florida, better known as the Brethren around Trumble, a minimum security federal prison with no fences, no guard towers, no razor wire. If you had to do time, do it the federal way, and do it in a place like Trumble.

"Should we default him?" Spicer asked Beech.

"No, just continue it until next week."

"Okay. I don't suppose he's going anywhere." "I object to a continuance," Magruder said from the crowd.

"Too bad," said Spicer. "It's continued until next week."

Magruder was on his feet. "That's the third time it's been continued. I'm the plaintiff. I sued him. He runs to the infirmary every time we have a docket."

"What're ya'll fightin over?" Spicer asked.

"Seventeen dollars and two magazines," T. Karl said helpfully.

"That much, huh?" Spicer said. Seventeen dollars would get you sued every time at Trumble.

Finn Yarber was already bored. With one hand he stroked his shaggy gray beard, and with the other he raked his long fingernails across the table. Then he popped his toes, loudly, crunching them into the floor in an efficient little workout that grated on the nerves. In his other life, when he had titles-Mr. Chief Justice of the California Supreme Court-he often presided while wearing leather clogs, no socks, so that he could exercise his toes during the dull oral arguments. "Continue it," he said.

"Justice delayed is justice denied," Magruder said solemnly.

"Now that's original," said Beech. "One more week, then we'll default Schneider."

"So ordered," Spicer said, with great finality. T. Karl made a note in the docket book. Magruder sat down in a huff. He'd filed his complaint in the Inferior Court by handing to T. Karl a one-page summary of his allegations against Schneider. Only one page. The Brethren didn't tolerate paperwork. One page and you got your day in court. Schneider had replied with six pages of invective, all of which had been summarily stricken by T. Karl.

The rules were kept simple. Short pleadings. No discovery. Quick justice. Decisions on the spot, and all decisions were binding if both parties submitted to the jurisdiction of

the court. No appeals; there was nowhere to take one. Witnesses were not given an oath to tell the truth. Lying was completely expected. It was, after all, a prison.

"What's next?" Spicer asked.

T. Karl hesitated for a second, then said, "It's the Whiz case." Things were suddenly still for a moment, then the plastic cafeteria chairs rattled forward in one noisy offensive. The inmates scooted and shuffled until T. Karl announced, "That's close enough!" They were less than twenty feet away from the bench.

"We shall maintain decorum!" he proclaimed.

The Whiz matter had been festering for months at Trumble. Whiz was a young Wall Street crook who'd bilked some rich clients. Four million dollars had never been accounted for, and legend held that Whiz had stashed it offshore and managed it from inside Trumble. He had six years left, and would be almost forty when paroled. It was widely assumed that he was quietly serving his time until one glorious day when he would walk free, still a young man, and fly off in a private jet to a beach where the money was waiting.

Inside, the legend only grew, partly because Whiz kept to himself and spent long hours every day studying financials and technical charts and reading impenetrable economic publications. Even the warden had tried to cajole him into sharing market tips.

An ex-lawyer known as Rook had somehow got next to Whiz, and had somehow convinced him to share a small morsel of advice with an investment club that met once a week in the prison chapel. On behalf of the club, Rook was now suing the Whiz for fraud.

Rook took the witness chair, and began his narrative. The usual rules of procedure and evidence were dispensed with so that the truth could be arrived at quickly, whatever form it might take.

"So I go to the Whiz and I ask him what he thinks about ValueNow, a new online company I read about in Forbes," Rook explained. "It was about to go public, and I liked the idea behind the company. Whiz said he'd check it out for me. I heard nothing. So I went back to him and said, 'Hey, Whiz, what about ValueNow?' And he said he thought it was a solid company and the stock would go through the roof."

"I did not say that," the Whiz inserted quickly. He was seated across the room, by himself, his arms folded over the chair in front.

"Yes you did."

"I did not."

"Anyway, I go back to the club and tell them that Whiz is high on the deal, so we decide we want to buy some stock in ValueNow. But little guys can't buy because the offering is closed. I go back to Whiz over there and I say, 'Look, Whiz, you think you could pull

some strings with your buddies on Wall Street and get us a few shares of ValueNow? And Whiz said he thought he could do that."

"That's a lie," said Whiz. "Quiet," said Justice Spicer. "You'll get your chance."

"He's lying," Whiz said, as if there was a rule against it.

If Whiz had money, you'd never know it, at least not on the inside. His eight-by-twelve cell was bare except for stacks of financial publications. No stereo, fan, books, cigarettes, none of the usual assets acquired by almost everyone else. This only added to the legend. He was considered a miser, a weird little man who saved every penny and was no doubt stashing everything offshore.

"Anyway," Rook continued, "we decided to gamble by taking a big position in ValueNow. Our strategy was to liquidate our holdings and consolidate."

"Consolidate?" asked Justice Beech. Rook sounded like a portfolio manager who handled billions.

"Right, consolidate. We borrowed all we could from friends and family, and had close to a thousand bucks."

"A thousand bucks," repeated Justice Spicer. Not bad for an inside job. "Then what happened?"

"I told Whiz over there that we were ready to move. Could he get us the stock? This was on a Tuesday. The offering was on a Friday. Whiz said no problem. Said he had a buddy at Goldman Sux or some such place that could take care of us."

"That's a lie," Whiz shot from across the room.

"Anyway, on Wednesday I saw Whiz in the east yard, and I asked him about the stock. He said no problem."

"That's a lie."

"I got a witness."

"Who?" asked Justice Spicer.

"Picasso."

Picasso was sitting behind Rook, as were the other six members of the investment club. Picasso reluctantly waved his hand.

"Is that true?" Spicer asked.

"Yep," Picasso answered. "Rook asked about the stock. Whiz said he would get it. No problem."

Picasso testified in a lot of cases, and had been caught lying more than most inmates.

"Continue," Spicer said.

"Anyway, Thursday I couldn't find Whiz anywhere. He was hiding from me."

"I was not."

"Friday, the stock goes public. It was offered at twenty a share, the price we could've bought it for if Mr. Wall Street over there had done what he promised. It opened at sixty, spent most of the day at eighty, then closed at seventy. Our plans were to sell it as soon as possible. We could've bought fifty shares at twenty, sold them at eighty, and walked away from the deal with three thousand dollars in profits."

Violence was very rare at Trumble. Three thousand dollars would not get you killed, but some bones might be broken. Whiz had been lucky so far. There'd been no ambush.

"And you think the Whiz owes you these lost profits?" asked ex-Chief Justice Finn Yarber, now plucking his eyebrows.

"Damned right we do. Look, what makes the deal stink even worse is that Whiz bought ValueNow for himself."

"That's a damned lie," Whiz said.

"Language, please," Justice Beech said. If you wanted to lose a case before the Brethren, just offend Beech with your language.

The rumors that Whiz had bought the stock for himself had been started by Rook and his gang. There was no proof of it, but the story had proved irresistible and had been repeated by most inmates so often that it was now established as fact. It fit so nicely.

"Is that all?" Spicer asked Rook. Rook had other points he wanted to elaborate on, but the Brethren had no patience with windy litigants. Especially ex-lawyers still reliving their glory days. There were at least five of them at Trumble, and they seemed to be on the docket all the time.

"I guess so," Rook said.

"What do you have to say?" Spicer asked the Whiz.

Whiz stood and took a few steps toward their table. He glared at his accusers, Rook and his gang of losers. Then he addressed the court.

"What's the burden of proof here?"

Justice Spicer immediately lowered his eyes and waited for help. As a Justice of the Peace, he'd had no legal training. He'd never finished high school, then worked for twenty years in his father's country store. That's where the votes came from. Spicer

relied on common sense, which was often at odds with the law. Any questions dealing with legal theory would be handled by his two colleagues.

"It's whatever we say it is," Justice Beech said, relishing a debate with a stockbroker on the court's rules of procedure. "Clear and convincing proof?" asked the Whiz.

"Could be, but not in this case."

"Beyond a reasonable doubt?"

"Probably not."

"Preponderance of the evidence?"

"Now you're getting close."

"Then, they have no proof," the Whiz said, waving his hands like a bad actor in a bad TV drama.

"Why don't you just tell us your side of the story?" said Beech.

"I'd love to. ValueNow was a typical online offering, lots of hype, lots of red ink on the books. Sure Rook came to me, but by the time I could make my calls, the offering was closed. I called a friend who told me you couldn't get near the stock. Even the big boys were shut out."

"Now, how does that happen?" asked Justice Yarber.

The room was quiet. The Whiz was talking money, and everyone was listening.

"Happens all the time in IPOs. That's initial public offerings."

"We know what an IPO is," Beech said.

Spicer certainly did not. Didn't have many of those back in rural Mississippi.

The Whiz relaxed, just a little. He could dazzle them for a moment, win this nuisance of a case, then go back to his cave and ignore them.

"The ValueNow IPO was handled by the investment banking firm of Bakin-Kline, a small outfit in San Francisco. Five million shares were offered. Bakin-Kline basically presold the stock to its preferred customers and friends, so that most big investment firms never had a shot at the stock. Happens all the time."

The judges and the inmates, even the court jester, hung on every word. He continued. "It's silly to think that some disbarred yahoo sitting in prison, reading an old copy of Forbes, can somehow buy a thousand dollars' worth of ValueNow."

And at that very moment it did indeed seem very silly. Rook fumed while his club members began quietly blaming him.

"Did you buy any of it?" asked Beech.

"Of course not. I couldn't get near it. And besides, most of the high-tech and online companies are built with funny money. I stay away from them."

"What do you prefer?" Beech asked quickly, his curiosity getting the better of him.

"Value. The long haul. I'm in no hurry. Look, this is a bogus case brought by some boys looking for an easy buck." He waved toward Rook, who was sinking in his chair. The Whiz sounded perfectly believable and legitimate.

Rook's case was built on hearsay, speculation, and the corroboration of Picasso, a notorious liar.

"You got any witnesses?" Spicer asked.

"I don't need any," the Whiz said and took his seat.

Each of the three justices scribbled something on a slip of paper. Deliberations were quick, verdicts instantaneous. Yarber and Beech slid theirs to Spicer, who announced, "By a vote of two to one, we find for the defendant. Case dismissed. Who's next?"

The vote was actually unanimous, but every verdict was officially two to one. That allowed each of the three a little wiggle room if later confronted.

But the Brethren were well regarded around Trumble. Their decisions were quick and as fair as they could make them. In fact, they were remarkably accurate in light of the shaky testimony they often heard. Spicer had presided over small cases for years, in the back of his family's country store. He could spot a liar at fifty feet. Beech and Yarber had spent their careers in courtrooms, and had no tolerance for lengthy arguments and delays, the usual tactics.

"That's all today," T. Karl reported. "End of docket."

"Very well. Court is adjourned until next week."

T. Karl jumped to his feet, his curls again vibrating across his shoulders, and declared, "Court's adjourned. All rise." No one stood, no one moved as the Brethren left the room. Rook and his gang were huddled, no doubt planning their next lawsuit. The Whiz left quickly.

The assistant warden and the guard eased away without being seen. The weekly docket was one of the better shows at Trumble.

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