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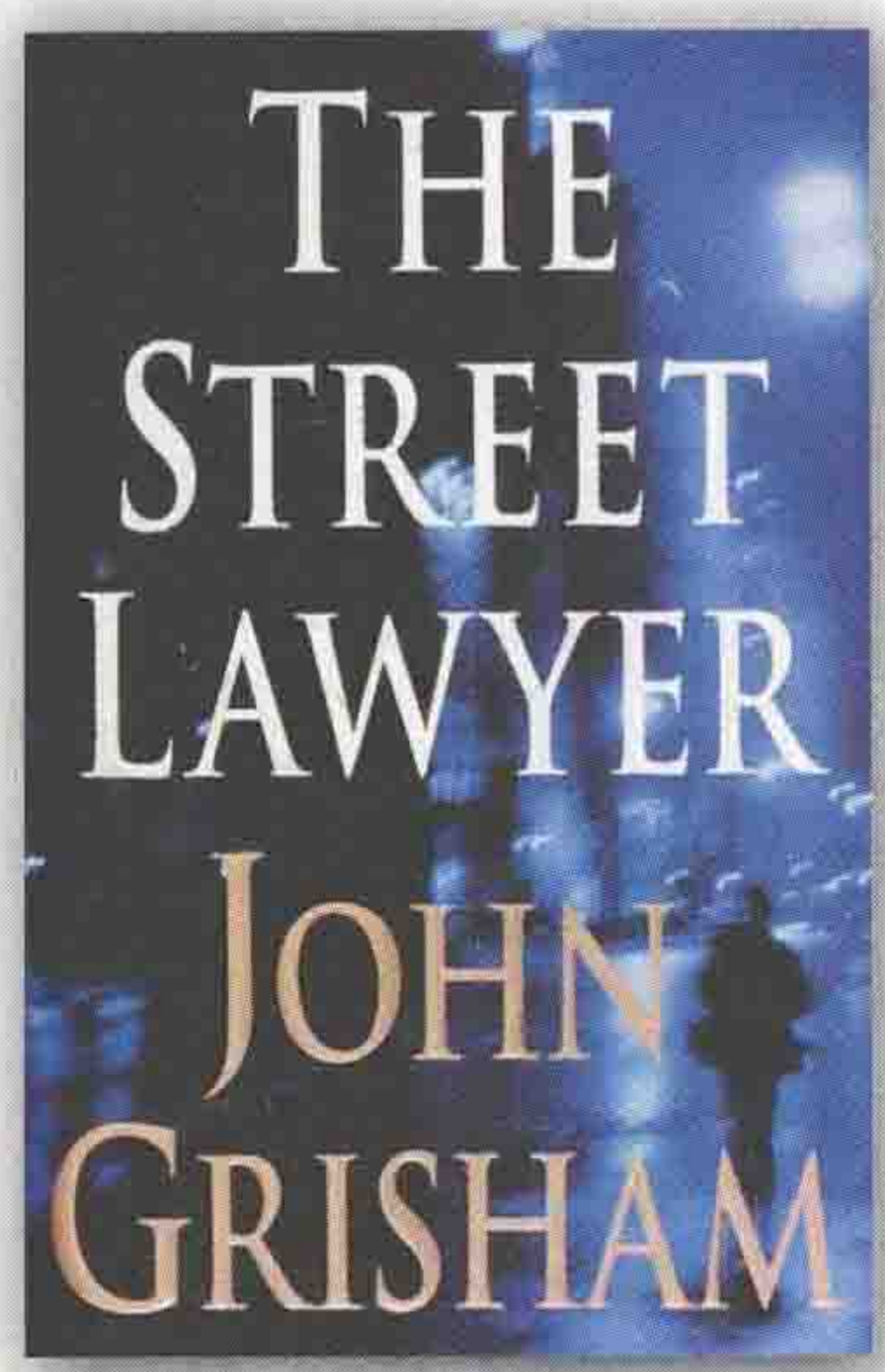

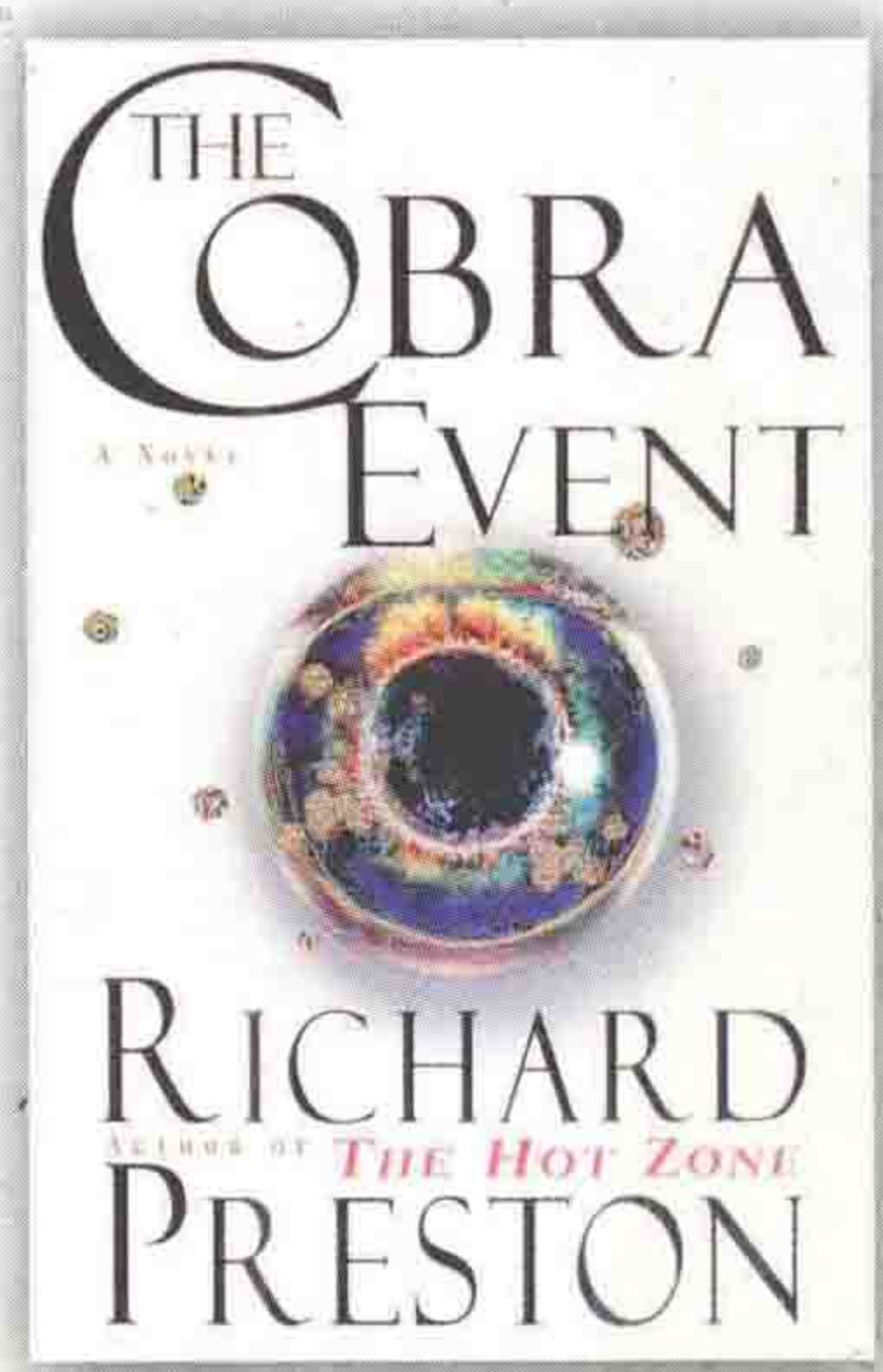

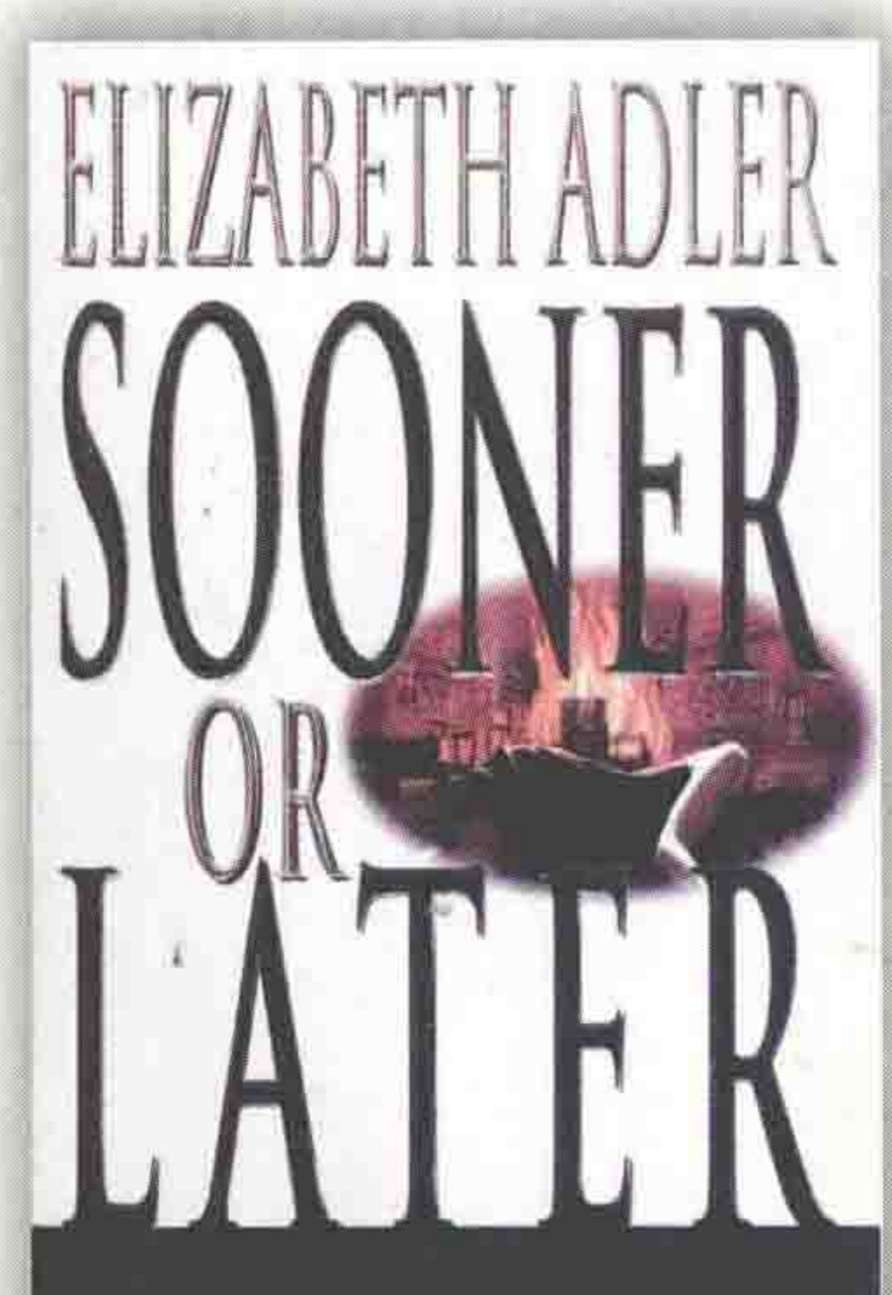

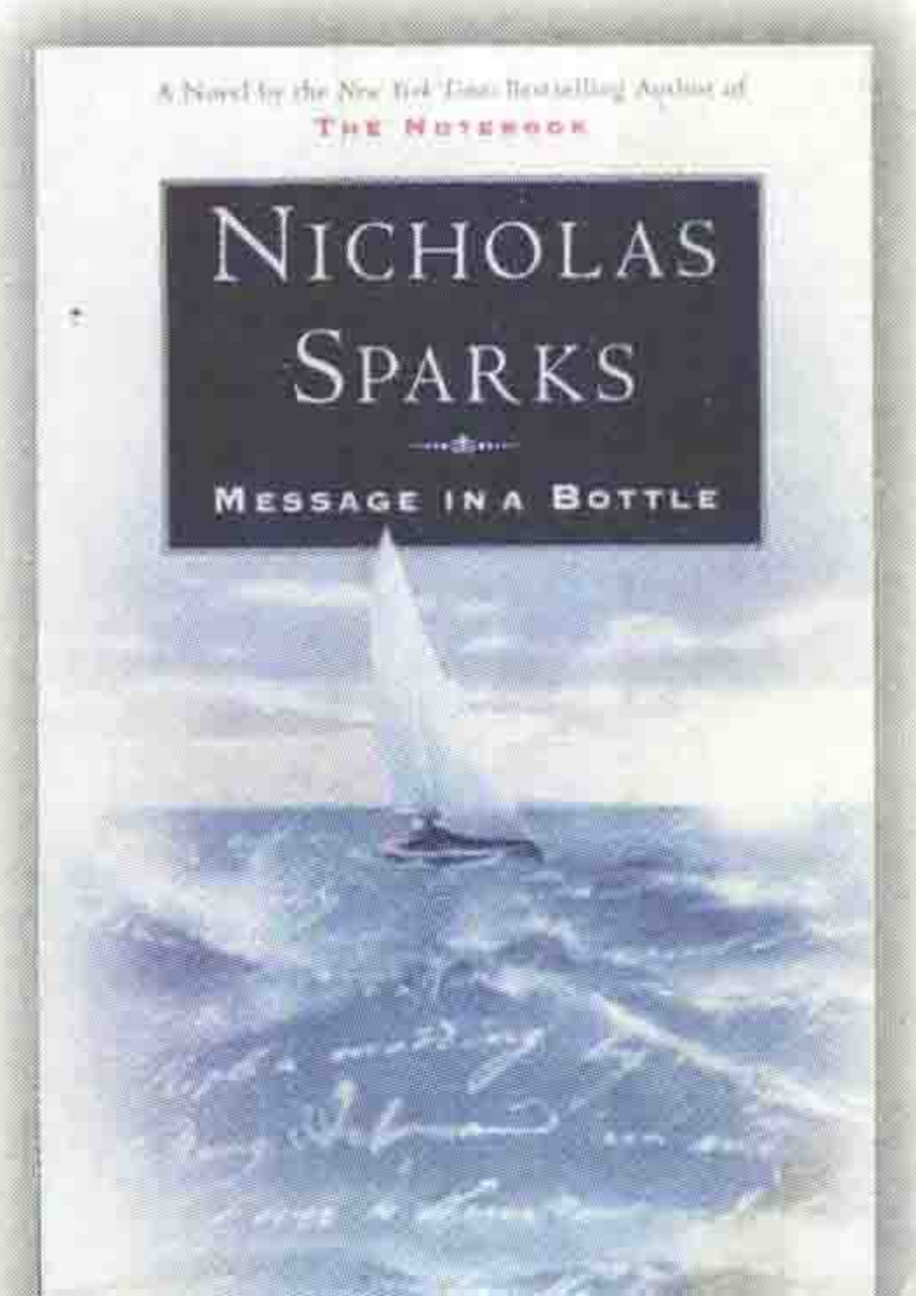

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ELIZABETH ADLER

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Asked about all the mouthwatering cuisine in *Sooner or Later,* Elizabeth Adler explained, "We're a food family." Both she and husband Richard, a retired attorney, love to cook. "He does Indian, I favor Italian: risottos, osso buco, and really first-rate salad dressings." Another link between the book and real life is daughter Anabelle, who studied architecture and then surprised Mom and Dad by opening a café on Main Street in Santa Monica!

Today the family is at home in southern California, where British-born Elizabeth delights in the sunshine. Once a month, though, she pays tribute to her Yorkshire roots with a traditional English Sunday lunch of roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, "and of course a good Santa Barbara pinot noir."

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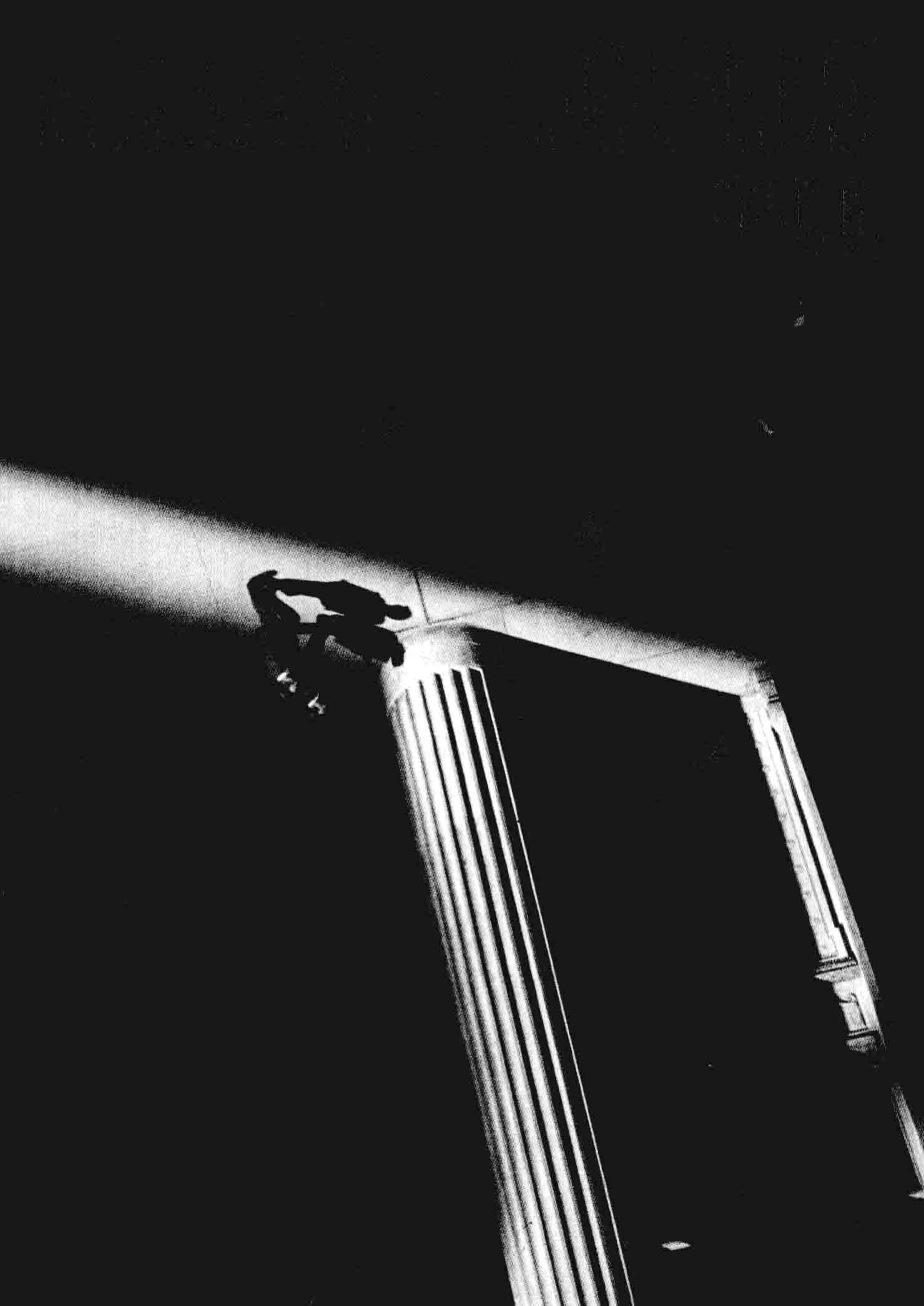

John Grisham

CHAPTER ONE

THE man with the rubber boots stepped into the elevator behind me, but I didn't see him at first. I smelled him, though—the pungent odor of smoke and cheap wine and life on the street without soap. We were alone as we moved upward, and when I finally glanced over, I saw the boots, black and dirty and much too large. A tattered trench coat fell to his knees. Under it, layers of foul clothing bunched around his midsection, so that he appeared stocky. He was black and aging—his beard and hair were half gray and hadn't been washed or cut in years. He looked straight ahead through thick sunglasses, ignoring me.

He didn't belong. It was not his building, not his elevator, not a place he could afford. The lawyers on all eight floors worked for my firm at hourly rates that still seemed obscene to me, even after seven years. He was just another street bum in from the cold. Happened all the time in downtown Washington, D.C. But we had security guards to deal with the riffraff.

We stopped at six, and I noticed for the first time that he had not pushed a button, had not selected a floor. He was following me. I made a quick exit, and as I stepped into the splendid marble foyer of Drake & Sweeney, I glanced over my shoulder and saw him standing in the elevator, still looking at nothing.

Madame Devier, one of our very resilient receptionists, greeted me with her typical look of disdain. "Watch the elevator," I said.

"Why?"

"Street bum. You may want to call security."

"Those people," she said in her affected French accent.

I walked away, wrestling my overcoat off my shoulders, forgetting the man with the rubber boots. I had nonstop meetings throughout the afternoon, important conferences with important people. I turned the corner and was about to say something to Polly, my secretary, when I heard the first shot.

Madame Devier was standing behind her desk, petrified, staring into the barrel of an awfully long handgun held by our pal the street bum. Since I was the first one to come to her aid, he politely aimed it at me, and I too became rigid.

"Don't shoot," I said, hands in the air.

"Shut up," he mumbled with a great deal of composure.

There were voices in the hallway. Someone yelled, "He's got a gun!" And then the voices grew fainter as my colleagues hit the back door. I could almost see them jumping out the windows.

To my immediate left was a heavy wooden door that led to a large conference room, which at that moment happened to be filled with eight hard-nosed lawyers from our litigation section. The toughest was a scrappy little torpedo named Donald Rafter, and as he yanked open the door, saying, "What the hell?" the barrel swung from me to him.

"Put that gun down," Rafter ordered, and a split second later another shot rang through the reception area, a shot that went into the ceiling somewhere above Rafter's head and reduced him to a mere mortal. Turning the gun back to me, the street bum nodded, and I complied, entering the conference room behind Rafter.

The man with the rubber boots slammed the door behind me and slowly waved the gun through the air so that all eight litigators could admire it.

The room was dominated by a long table, covered with documents and papers that only seconds ago had seemed terribly impor-

tant. A row of windows overlooked a parking lot. Two doors led to the hallway.

"Up against the wall," he said, using the gun as a very effective prop. Then he placed it near my head and said, "Lock the doors." Which I did. Not a word from the eight litigators as they scrambled backward.

Using a series of grunts and gun thrusts, he lined the eight up against the wall. When their positions suited him, he turned his attention to me. What did he want? I couldn't see his eyes, because of the sunglasses, but he could see mine. The gun was pointed at them.

He removed his filthy trench coat, folded it as if it were new, and placed it in the center of the table. Then he slowly removed the next layer—a bulky gray cardigan.

Bulky for a reason. Under it, strapped to his waist, was a row of red sticks, which appeared to my untrained eye to be dynamite. Wires ran like colored spaghetti from the tops and bottoms of the sticks, and silver duct tape kept things attached.

My first instinct was to bolt, to lunge with arms and legs flapping and flailing for the door. But my knees shook, and my blood ran cold. There were gasps and moans from the eight against the wall. "Please be quiet," our captor said in the tone of a patient professor. His calmness unnerved me. From a pocket in his large trousers he produced a neat bundle of yellow nylon rope.

For good measure he waved the gun at the horrified faces in front of him and said, "I don't want to hurt anybody."

That was hard to take seriously. I counted twelve red sticks.

Then the gun was back on me. "You," he said, "tie them up."

Rafter had had enough. He took one very small step forward and said, "Look, pal, just exactly what do you want?"

The third shot sailed over his head into the ceiling. It sounded like a cannon, and Madame Devier shrieked in the foyer. Rafter ducked, and as he attempted to stand upright, the beefy elbow of fellow litigator Wayne Umstead caught him squarely in the chest and returned him to his position against the wall.

"Do not call me pal," the man said.

"What would you like us to call you?" I asked very delicately.

"Mister," he said. Mister was perfectly fine with everyone.

The phone rang, and he waved it over. I placed it squarely before him on the table. He lifted the receiver with his left hand; his right still held the gun, still pointed at Rafter. If the nine of us had a vote, Rafter would be the first sacrificial lamb. Eight to one.

"Hello," Mister said. He listened briefly, then hung up. He carefully backed himself into the seat at the end of the table and sat down. "Take the rope," he said to me.

He wanted all eight of them attached at the wrists. I tied knots and tried my best not to look at the faces of my colleagues as I hastened their deaths. I could feel the gun at my back.

Rafter mumbled something under his breath, and I wanted to slap him. Umstead was able to flex his wrists so that the ropes almost fell loose when I finished with him. Nate Malamud was sweating and breathing rapidly. He was the oldest, the only partner in the room, and two years past his first heart attack.

I couldn't help but look at Barry Nuzzo, my one friend in the bunch. We were the same age, thirty-two, and had joined the firm the same year. He went to Princeton; I went to Yale. Both of our wives were from Providence. His marriage was working—three kids in four years. Mine was deteriorating. Our eyes met. Thinking about his kids, I felt lucky to be childless.

The first of many sirens came into range of hearing, and Mister instructed me to close the blinds over the five large windows. I went about this methodically, scanning the parking lot below as if being seen might somehow save me. A lone police car sat empty with its lights on; the cops were already in the building.

Mister then instructed me to call "the boss" and inform him that he was armed and wired with twelve sticks of dynamite. I called Rudolph Mayes, managing partner of my division, antitrust, on the speakerphone and relayed the message.

"You okay, Mike?" he asked.

"Wonderful," I said. "Please do whatever he wants."

"What does he want?"

"I don't know yet."

Mister waved the gun, and the conversation was over.

He glanced down and gave a slight tug at a red wire. "This red one here—I give it a yank, and it's all over." The sunglasses were looking at me when he finished this little warning.

I felt compelled to say something. "Why would you do that?"

"I don't want to, but why not?"

I could not believe that we were going to die. There appeared to be no motive, no reason to kill us. He was just a nut in search of hostages, which unfortunately would make the killings seem almost normal by today's standards.

It was precisely the kind of senseless slaughter that would grab the headlines for twenty-four hours and make people shake their heads. Then the dead-lawyer jokes would start.

But I refused to believe it would happen. I heard voices in the foyer and a police radio squawk somewhere down the hallway.

Mister's voice broke the silence. "What did you eat for lunch?"

Too surprised to lie, I said, "A grilled chicken Caesar salad."

"Alone?"

"No. I met a friend." A law school buddy from Philly.

"How much did it cost, for both of you?"

"Thirty bucks."

He didn't like this. "Thirty bucks," he said. "For two people." He shook his head. "You know what I had?" he asked me.

"No."

"I had soup at a shelter. And I was glad to get it. You could feed a hundred of my friends for thirty bucks, you know that?"

I nodded gravely, as if I suddenly realized the weight of my sin.

"Collect all the wallets," he said, waving the gun again.

"May I ask why?" I asked, and began rummaging through the pockets of my fellow hostages.

"It's for the next of kin," Mister said, and we all exhaled.

He instructed me to place the loot in a briefcase, lock it, and toss it into the hallway. I did not see a person anywhere when I cracked open the door.

THE MINUTES DRAGGED ON. MY buddies had been standing for almost two hours, backs to the wall, still joined together, barely able to move. I caught myself picturing the other four hundred lawyers in the office, out there in the parking lot, most of them sitting in their cars to keep warm, chatting away on cell phones, billing somebody. The firm wouldn't miss a beat. Some of the cutthroats down there didn't care *how* it ended. Just hurry up and get it over with.

Mister seemed to doze for a second. His chin dipped, and his breathing was heavier. Rafter grunted to get my attention, then jerked his head as if to suggest I make a move. Rafter wanted me to be the hero. But we weren't in the army. I didn't take orders.

"How much money did you make last year?" Mister, very much awake, asked me, his voice clear.

Again I was startled. "I, uh, gosh, let me see—"

"Don't lie."

"A hundred and twenty thousand."

He didn't like this either. "How much did you give away?"

"Give away?"

"Yes. To charities."

"Oh. Well, I don't remember. My wife takes care of that."

All eight litigators seemed to shift at once.

Mister didn't like my answer. "What's your name?"

"Michael Brock," I answered politely. Nice to meet you.

"How much did you give to the hungry last year?" He continually toyed with the red wire, and that kept my heart rate racing.

"I paid around fifty thousand in taxes, and a nice chunk of it went for welfare, Medicaid, stuff like that."

"And you did this voluntarily, with a giving spirit?"

"I didn't complain," I said, lying like most of my countrymen.

"Have you ever been hungry?"

"No," I said, "I have not."

"Have you ever slept in the snow?"

"No."

"You make a lot of money, yet you're too greedy to hand me some change on the sidewalk." He waved the gun at the rest of