



JOHN GRISHAM

TRAVELLER'S EDITION

THE TESTAMENT

JOHN

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C
CENTURY

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Pantanal region of Brazil, in the states of Mato Grosso and Mato Grosso do Sul, is a land of great natural beauty and a fascinating place to visit. I hope I haven't portrayed it as one big swamp, fraught with danger. It is not. It's an ecological gem that attracts many tourists, most of whom survive. I've been there twice, and look forward to going back.

Carl King, my friend and a Baptist missionary in Campo Grande, took me deep into the Pantanal. I'm not sure how much of his information was accurate, but we had a wonderful time for four days counting alligators, photographing wildlife, looking for anacondas, eating black beans and rice, telling stories, all from a boat that somehow grew smaller. Many thanks to Carl for the adventure.

Thanks also to Rick Carter, Gene McDade, Penny Pynkala, Jonathan Hamilton, Fernando Catta-Preta, Bruce Sanford, Marc Smirnoff, and Estelle Laurence. And thanks, as always, to David Gernert for poring over the manuscript and making the book better.

ONE

DOWN TO THE LAST DAY, even the last hour now. I'm an old man, lonely and unloved, sick and hurting and tired of living. I am ready for the hereafter; it has to be better than this.

I own the tall glass building in which I sit, and 97 percent of the company housed in it, below me, and the land around it half a mile in three directions, and the two thousand people who work here and the other twenty thousand who do not, and I own the pipeline under the land that brings gas to the building from my fields in Texas, and I own the utility lines that deliver electricity, and I lease the satellite unseen miles above by which I once barked commands to my empire flung far around the world. My assets exceed eleven billion dollars. I own silver in Nevada and copper in Montana and coffee in Kenya and coal in Angola and rubber in Malaysia and natural gas in Texas and crude oil in Indonesia and steel in China. My company owns companies that produce electricity and make computers and build dams and print paperbacks and broadcast signals to my satellite. I have subsidiaries with divisions in more countries than anyone can find.

I once owned all the appropriate toys—the yachts and jets and

blondes, the homes in Europe, farms in Argentina, an island in the Pacific, thoroughbreds, even a hockey team. But I've grown too old for toys.

The money is the root of my misery.

I had three families—three ex-wives who bore seven children, six of whom are still alive and doing all they can to torment me. To the best of my knowledge, I fathered all seven, and buried one. I should say his mother buried him. I was out of the country.

I am estranged from all the wives and all the children. They're gathering here today because I'm dying and it's time to divide the money.

I HAVE PLANNED this day for a long time. My building has fourteen floors, all long and wide and squared around a shaded courtyard in the rear where I once held lunches in the sunshine. I live and work on the top floor—twelve thousand square feet of opulence that would seem obscene to many but doesn't bother me in the least. By sweat and brains and luck I built every dime of my fortune. Spending it is my prerogative. Giving it away should be my choice too, but I'm being hounded.

Why should I care who gets the money? I've done everything imaginable with it. As I sit here in my wheelchair, alone and waiting, I cannot think of a single thing I want to buy, or see, or a single place I want to go, or another adventure I want to pursue.

I've done it all, and I'm very tired.

I don't care who gets the money. But I do care very much who does not get it.

Every square foot of this building was designed by me, and so I know exactly where to place everyone for this little ceremony. They're all here, waiting and waiting, though they don't mind. They'd stand naked in a blizzard for what I'm about to do.

The first family is Lillian and her brood—four of my offspring born to a woman who rarely let me touch her. We married young—I was twenty-four and she was eighteen—and so Lillian is

old too. I haven't seen her in years, and I won't see her today. I'm sure she's still playing the role of the grieving, abandoned yet dutiful first wife who got traded in for a trophy. She has never remarried, and I'm sure she hasn't had sex in fifty years. I don't know how we reproduced.

Her oldest is now forty-seven, Troy Junior, a worthless idiot who is cursed with my name. As a boy he adopted the nickname of TJ, and still prefers it to Troy. Of the six children gathered here now, TJ is the dumbest, though it's close. He was tossed from college when he was nineteen for selling drugs.

TJ, like the rest, was given five million dollars on his twenty-first birthday. And like the rest, it ran like water through his fingers.

I cannot bear to recount the miserable histories of Lillian's children. Suffice to say they're all heavily in debt and virtually unemployable, with little hope of changing, so my signing of this will is the most critical event in their lives.

Back to the ex-wives. From the frigidity of Lillian, I ran to the steamy passion of Janie, a beautiful young thing hired as a secretary in Accounting but promoted rapidly when I decided I needed her on business trips. I divorced Lillian and married Janie, who was twenty-two years younger than I was and determined to keep me satisfied. She had two children as fast as she could. She used them as anchors to keep me close. Rocky, the younger, was killed in a sports car with two of his buddies, in a wreck that cost me six million to settle out of court.

I married Tira when I was sixty-four. She was twenty-three and pregnant by me with a little monster she named Ramble, for some reason that was never clear to me. Ramble is now fourteen, and already has one arrest for shoplifting and one arrest for possession of marijuana. His oily hair sticks to his neck and falls way down his back, and he adorns himself with rings in his ears, eyebrows, and nose. I'm told he goes to school when he feels like it.

Ramble is ashamed that his father is almost eighty, and his father is ashamed that his son has silver beads pierced through his tongue.

And he, along with the rest of them, expects me to sign my name on this will and make his life better. As large as my fortune is, the money won't last long among these fools.

A dying old man should not hate, but I cannot help it. They are a miserable bunch, all of them. Their mothers hate me, so the children in turn have been taught to hate me too.

They are vultures circling with clawed feet, sharp teeth, and hungry eyes, giddy with the anticipation of unlimited cash.

THE SOUNDNESS of my mind is of great issue now. They think I have a tumor because I say weird things. I babble on incoherently in meetings and on the phone, and my aides behind my back whisper and nod and think to themselves, Yes, it's true. It's the tumor.

I made a will two years ago and left everything to the last live-in, who at the time paraded around my apartment in leopard print panties and nothing else and, yes, I guess I'm crazy about twenty-year-old blondes with all the curves. But she later got the boot. The shredder got the will. I simply got tired.

Three years ago I made a will, just for the hell of it, and left everything to charities, over a hundred of them. I was cursing TJ one day, and he was cursing me, and I told him about this new will. He and his mother and his siblings hired a bunch of crooked lawyers and ran to court in an attempt to have me committed to an institution for treatment and evaluation. This was actually smart on the part of their lawyers because if I'd been judged mentally incompetent my will would have been void.

But I have many lawyers, and I pay them a thousand dollars an hour to manipulate the legal system in my favor. I was not committed, though at the time I was probably a bit off my rocker.

And I have my own shredder, one I've used for all the old wills. They're all gone, eaten by a little machine.

I wear long white robes made of Thai silk, and I shave my head like a monk, and I eat little, so that my body is small and shriveled. They think I'm a Buddhist but in reality I study Zoroaster. They

don't know the difference. I can almost understand why they think my mental capacity has diminished.

Lillian and the first family are in the executive conference room on the thirteenth floor, just below me. It's a large room, marble and mahogany, with rich rugs and a long oval table down the center, and it's now filled with very nervous people. Not surprisingly, there are more lawyers than family members. Lillian has a lawyer, and so does each of her four children, except for TJ, who has brought along three to show his importance and make certain all scenarios are properly counseled. TJ has more legal problems than most death row inmates. At one end of the table is a large digital screen which will broadcast the proceedings.

TJ's brother is Rex, age forty-four, my second son, currently married to a stripper. Amber is her name, a poor creature without a brain but with a large fake chest, who, I think, is his third wife. Second or third, but who am I to condemn? She's here, along with the rest of the current spouses and/or live-ins, fidgeting nervously as eleven billion is about to be divided.

Lillian's first daughter, my oldest, is Libbigail, a child I loved desperately until she left for college and forgot about me. Then she married an African and I erased her name from my wills.

Mary Ross was the last child born to Lillian. She's married to a doctor who aspires to be super-rich, but they are heavily in debt.

Janie and the second family wait in a room on the tenth floor. Janie has had two husbands since our divorce many years ago. I'm almost certain she is living alone at the moment. I hire investigators to keep me posted, but not even the FBI could keep track of her bed-hopping. As I mentioned, Rocky, her son, was killed. Her daughter Geena is here with her second husband, a moron with an MBA who is just dangerous enough to take a half a billion or so and masterfully lose it in three years.

And then there's Ramble, slouching in a chair on the fifth floor, licking the gold ring in the corner of his lip, fingering his sticky green hair, scowling at his mother, who had the gall to appear here

today with a hairy little gigolo. Ramble expects to get rich today, to be handed a fortune simply because he was sired by me. And Ramble has a lawyer too, a hippie radical sort Tira saw on television and hired right after she laid him. They're waiting, along with the rest.

I know these people. I watch them.

SNEAD APPEARS from the rear of my apartment. He's been my gofer for almost thirty years now, a round homely little man in a white waistcoat, meek and humble, perpetually bent at the waist as if bowing to the king. Snead stops before me, hands clasped at the belly, as always, head cocked to one side, drippy smile, and says, "How are you, sir?" in an affected lilt he acquired years back when we were staying in Ireland.

I say nothing, because I'm neither required nor expected to respond to Snead.

"Some coffee, sir?"

"Lunch."

Snead winks with both eyes and bows even deeper, then waddles from the room, his trouser cuffs dragging the floor. He too expects to be made rich when I die, and I suppose he's counting the days like the rest of them.

The trouble with having money is that everybody wants a little of it. Just a slice, a small sliver. What's a million dollars to a man with billions? Give me a million, old boy, and you'll never know the difference. Float me a loan, and we'll both forget about it. Wedge my name in the will somewhere; there's room for it.

Snead's nosy as hell and years ago I caught him picking through my desk, looking, I think, for the current will. He wants me to die because he expects a few million.

What right does he have to expect anything? I should've fired him years ago.

His name is not mentioned in my new will.

He sets a tray before me: an unopened tube of Ritz crackers, a

small jar of honey with the plastic seal around the lid, and a twelve-ounce can of Fresca, room temperature. Any variation and Snead would be fired on the spot.

I dismiss him, and dip the crackers in the honey. The final meal.

TWO

I SIT AND STARE through the tinted glass walls. On a clear day, I can see the top of the Washington Monument six miles away, but not today. Today is raw and cold, windy and overcast, not a bad day to die. The wind blows the last of the leaves from their branches and scatters them through the parking lot below.

Why I am worried about the pain? What's wrong with a little suffering? I've caused more misery than any ten people.

I push a button and Snead appears. He bows and pushes my wheelchair through the door of my apartment, into the marble foyer, down the marble hall, through another door. We're getting closer, but I feel no anxiety.

I've kept the shrinks waiting for over two hours.

We pass my office and I nod at Nicolette, my latest secretary, a darling young thing I'm quite fond of. Given some time, she might become number four.

But there is no time. Only minutes.

A mob is waiting—packs of lawyers and some psychiatrists who'll determine if I'm in my right mind. They are crowded around a long table in my conference room, and when I enter, their conversation

stops immediately and everybody stares. Snead situates me on one side of the table, next to my lawyer, Stafford.

There are cameras pointing in all directions, and the technicians scramble to get them focused. Every whisper, every move, every breath will be recorded because a fortune is at stake.

The last will I signed gave little to my children. Josh Stafford prepared it, as always. I shredded it this morning.

I'm sitting here to prove to the world that I am of sufficient mental capacity to make a new will. Once it is proved, the disposition of my assets cannot be questioned.

Directly across from me are three shrinks—one hired by each family. On folded index cards before them someone has printed their names—Dr. Zadel, Dr. Flowe, Dr. Theishen. I study their eyes and faces. Since I am supposed to appear sane, I must make eye contact.

They expect me to be somewhat loony, but I'm about to eat them for lunch.

Stafford will run the show. When everyone is settled and the cameras are ready, he says, "My name is Josh Stafford, and I'm the attorney for Mr. Troy Phelan, seated here to my right."

I take on the shrinks, one at a time, eye to eye, glare to glare, until each blinks or looks away. All three wear dark suits. Zadel and Flowe have scraggly beards. Theishen has a bow tie and looks no more than thirty. The families were given the right to hire anyone they wanted.

Stafford is talking. "The purpose of this meeting is to have Mr. Phelan examined by a panel of psychiatrists to determine his testamentary capacity. Assuming the panel finds him to be of sound mind, then he intends to sign a will which will dispose of his assets upon his death."

Stafford taps his pencil on a one-inch-thick will lying before us. I'm sure the cameras zoom in for a close-up, and I'm sure the very sight of the document sends shivers up and down the spines of my children and their mothers scattered throughout my building.

They haven't seen the will, nor do they have the right to. A will

is a private document revealed only after death. The heirs can only speculate as to what it might contain. My heirs have received hints, little lies I've carefully planted.

They've been led to believe that the bulk of my estate will somehow be divided fairly among the children, with generous gifts to the ex-wives. They know this; they can feel it. They've been praying fervently for this for weeks, even months. This is life and death for them because they're all in debt. The will lying before me is supposed to make them rich and stop the bickering. Stafford prepared it, and in conversations with their lawyers he has, with my permission, painted in broad strokes the supposed contents of the will. Each child will receive something in the range of three hundred to five hundred million, with another fifty million going to each of the three ex-wives. These women were well provided for in the divorces, but that, of course, has been forgotten.

Total gifts to the families of approximately three billion dollars. After the government rakes off several billion the rest will go to charity.

So you can see why they're here, shined, groomed, sober (for the most part), and eagerly watching the monitors and waiting and hoping that I, the old man, can pull this off. I'm sure they've told their shrinks, "Don't be too hard on the old boy. We want him sane."

If everyone is so happy, then why bother with this psychiatric examination? Because I'm gonna screw 'em one last time, and I want to do it right.

The shrinks are my idea, but my children and their lawyers are too slow to realize it.

Zadel goes first. "Mr. Phelan, can you tell us the date, time, and place?"

I feel like a first-grader. I drop my chin to my chest like an imbecile and ponder the question long enough to make them ease to the edge of their seats and whisper, "Come on, you crazy old bastard. Surely you know what day it is."

"Monday," I say softly. "Monday, December 9, 1996. The place is my office."

"The time?"

"About two-thirty in the afternoon," I say. I don't wear a watch.

"And where is your office?"

"McLean, Virginia."

Flowe leans into his microphone. "Can you state the names and birthdates of your children?"

"No. The names, maybe, but not the birthdates."

"Okay, give us the names."

I take my time. It's too early to be sharp. I want them to sweat. "Troy Phelan, Jr., Rex, Libbigail, Mary Ross, Geena, and Ramble." I utter these as if they're painful to even think about.

Flowe is allowed a follow-up. "And there was a seventh child, right?"

"Right."

"Do you remember his name?"

"Rocky."

"And what happened to him?"

"He was killed in an auto accident." I sit straight in my wheelchair, head high, eyes darting from one shrink to the next, projecting pure sanity for the cameras. I'm sure my children and my ex-wives are proud of me, watching the monitors in their little groups, squeezing the hands of their current spouses, and smiling at their hungry lawyers because old Troy so far has handled the preliminaries.

My voice may be low and hollow, and I may look like a nut with my white silk robe, shriveled face, and green turban, but I've answered their questions.

Come on, old boy, they're pleading.

Theishen asks, "What is your current physical condition?"

"I've felt better."

"It's rumored you have a cancerous tumor."

Get right to the point, don't you?

"I thought this was a mental exam," I say, glancing at Stafford, who can't suppress a smile. But the rules allow any question. This is not a courtroom.

"It is," Theishen says politely. "But every question is relevant."

"I see."

"Will you answer the question?"

"About what?"

"About the tumor."

"Sure. It's in my head, the size of a golf ball, growing every day, inoperable, and my doctor says I won't last three months."

I can almost hear the champagne corks popping below me. The tumor has been confirmed!

"Are you, at this moment, under the influence of any medication, drug, or alcohol?"

"No."

"Do you have in your possession any type of medication to relieve pain?"

"Not yet."

Back to Zadel: "Mr. Phelan, three months ago *Forbes* magazine listed your net worth at eight billion dollars. Is that a close estimate?"

"Since when is *Forbes* known for its accuracy?"

"So it's not accurate?"

"It's between eleven and eleven and a half, depending on the markets." I say this very slowly, but my words are sharp, my voice carries authority. No one doubts the size of my fortune.

Flowe decides to pursue the money. "Mr. Phelan, can you describe, in general, the organization of your corporate holdings?"

"I can, yes."

"Will you?"

"I suppose." I pause and let them sweat. Stafford assured me I do not have to divulge private information here. Just give them an overall picture, he said.

"The Phelan Group is a private corporation which owns seventy different companies, a few of which are publicly traded."