Introduction

"Nobody earns $10 million in six months, Clay. You might win it, steal it, or have it drop out of the sky, but nobody earns money like that. It's ridiculous."

Clay Carter is an overworked, underpaid public defender in Washington, D.C. He is appointed to represent a drug offender, Tequila Watson, who is charged with the apparently motiveless murder of Ramón "Pumpkin" Pumphrey. But while investigating the case, Clay is approached by a mysterious stranger who makes him an offer that he simply cannot refuse. Clay leaves his job and his client. He starts his own law firm and becomes a multi-millionaire by organizing class-action lawsuits—or mass torts, as they are known—against large companies whose products have proved dangerous to the people who have used them. Life seems wonderful—money, beautiful women, invitations to meet the President, private jets, and his picture on the front page of magazines and newspapers across the country—but, as in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, such unlimited financial success and personal pleasure does not come without a price to be paid …

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John Grisham was born on February 8, 1955, in Jonesboro, Arkansas. His father worked as a builder and a cotton farmer, and his mother was a homemaker. As a boy, he dreamed of becoming a professional baseball player but realized that he did not have the talent for this and changed his goals. He was encouraged by his mother to love books, and Grisham soon became an enthusiastic reader. His favorite writer was John Steinbeck.

In 1977, Grisham graduated from Mississippi State University with his first degree, and four years later he graduated from law school. While he was studying law, he was especially interested

in criminal and general law, and he made great use of this knowledge in his later work as a writer.

Grisham worked as a small-town general lawyer in Southaven for ten years, and was also elected as a Democrat to the Mississippi House of Representatives in 1983. He was a very busy man, working sixty to seventy hours a week in his law practice, but he still found time for his favorite hobby, writing. In 1984, he began writing his first novel, *A Time to Kill*, which was eventually published in 1988, but at first without great success.

The day after he completed *A Time to Kill*, Grisham started work on a second novel about a young lawyer who worked for a law firm that was not as honest as it seemed. This second novel, *The Firm*, was published in 1991 and was an immediate success. The story was sold to Paramount Pictures for $600,000, and spent 47 weeks on *The New York Times* best-seller list, becoming the best-selling novel of 1991.

After this, Grisham gave up his legal practice and stopped his political work to become a full-time writer. He produced at least one book a year, most of them hugely successful best-sellers. Since *The Firm*, Grisham has written fifteen more legal thrillers, including *The Pelican Brief* (1992), *The Client* (1993), *The Rainmaker* (1995), *The Runaway Jury* (1996), *The Brethren* (2000), *The King of Torts* (2003), *The Last Juror* (2004) and, his most recent book, *The Associate* (2009). He has also written four non-legal novels and one non-fiction book, *The Innocent Man* (2006). Seven of Grisham's stories have been made into movies, greatly increasing his international popularity. The first movie was *The Firm* (1993), with Tom Cruise and Gene Hackman in the leading roles. One of his non-legal stories, *Skipping Christmas* (2001), was made into a movie called *Christmas with the Kranks* in 2004.

In 1998, *Publishers Weekly* announced that Grisham was "the best-selling novelist of the 90s." His books have sold more

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than 60 million copies worldwide and have been translated into twenty-nine languages. *The Pelican Brief* (made into a film in 1993 with Julia Roberts and Denzel Washington) sold an amazing 11,232,480 copies in the United States alone.

Grisham lives with his wife and two children on their two farms in Mississippi and Virginia.

Almost all John Grisham stories are about law, justice, and the court system. They are always very complicated, showing in great detail the lives of lawyers, judges, and clients, but they are also entertaining and exciting. Honest, ordinary "little" people find themselves in great danger when they fight large, powerful, dishonest organizations. Unlike in the real, modern world, where our lives are increasingly governed and controlled by impersonal, powerful, and often dishonest forces, the "little" person in a John Grisham story usually wins.

The King of Torts, however, is Grisham's most unusual legal thriller. In this story, the good guy and the bad guy are the same person. We are given a description of a man, Clay Carter, who finds himself in great moral difficulties. He is basically a decent man who surrenders to his inner greed and becomes a lawyer more interested in making money than serving justice. In this book, Grisham's anger targets the attorneys who work in mass tort litigation. In his view, lawyers like these are damaging the legal profession. Today, in the United States, there is a great debate over changes to tort laws. Grisham's story gives anyone interested in this debate useful information about how these lawyers operate, but it also keeps the reader guessing about how it will all end. How rich is it possible for one man to become before, like Doctor Faustus, he is destroyed by his own greed?

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Chapter 1 Tequila Watson

The shots that fired the bullets that entered Pumpkin's head were heard by eight people. Three immediately closed their windows, locked their doors, and withdrew to the safety of their small apartments. Two others, with previous experience of incidents like this, ran away faster than the gunman himself. Another, who was digging through some garbage for cans, jumped behind a pile of boxes until the shooting stopped. Two saw almost everything. They were sitting at the corner of Georgia Street and Lamont Street in front of a grocery store, half-hidden by a parked car so that the gunman, who glanced around briefly before following Pumpkin into the alley, didn't see them. Both told the police that they saw the boy with the gun reach into his pocket and pull it out. A second later they heard the shots, though they didn't actually see Pumpkin get hit. But they *did* see the boy with the gun rush out of the alley and run straight in their direction. He ran bent at the waist with a scared and guilty look on his face. When he passed them he was still holding the gun which, for one terrifying second, he seemed to point at them. Keeping their heads down, both of them crawled as quickly as they could into the grocery store and shouted for someone to call the police—there had been a shooting.

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Thirty minutes later, the police received a call that a young man matching the description of Pumpkin's killer had been seen carrying a gun in open view on Ninth Street and acting very strangely. The police found their man an hour later. His name was Tequila Watson, a black male, age twenty, with the usual drug-related police record. No family. No address. The last place he had been sleeping was a rehab unit on W Street. He had thrown away the gun and had also thrown away the cash or drugs he must have stolen from Pumpkin because his pockets

were empty. The police were certain that Tequila hadn't been affected by drink or drugs when he shot Pumpkin. After a few quick, rough questions, he was handcuffed, pushed into the back seat of the police car, and taken back to the alley near Lamont Street where he had killed Pumpkin.

"Ever been here before?" one policeman asked.

Tequila said nothing, just stared at the pool of fresh blood on the dirty ground.

After the two witnesses from outside the grocery store had identified him, Tequila was pushed into the car once again and taken to jail. He was charged with murder and sat quietly in a crowded cell, saying nothing to anyone, just staring at the floor.

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Pumpkin's mother, Adelfa Pumphrey, was sitting behind a desk just inside the basement entrance of a large office building on New York Avenue, watching the security screens. She was a large woman in a tight brown uniform, a gun on her waist, an empty look on her face. The policemen who approached her had visited her many times before. They gave her the news, then found her boss.

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In a city where young people killed each other every day, every mother knew many others who had lost their children, and every mother knew that she could lose hers at any time. The mothers had watched the other mothers survive with horror. As Adelfa Pumphrey sat at her desk with her face in her hands, she thought of her son and his lifeless body being inspected by strangers somewhere in the city at that moment.

She cried for her baby and swore revenge on whoever had killed him.

♦

Adelfa went to court to watch her son's killer being formally

charged. The police told her that it would be a quick, routine matter: the killer would plead not guilty and ask for a lawyer. She was in the back row with her brother on one side and a neighbor on the other, crying into a damp handkerchief. She wanted to see the boy. She also wanted to ask him why, but she knew she would never get the chance.

They brought the criminals into the courtroom like cattle at a market. All were black, all wore orange prison suits and handcuffs—and all of them were young. In addition to his handcuffs, Tequila had chains on his wrists and ankles because his crime had been especially violent, though he looked fairly harmless now. Adelfa stared at the thin boy in the orange prison suit and wondered where his mother was, how she had raised him, if he had a father, and—most important—why he had killed her son. The police had told her that drugs weren't involved in the killing. But she knew better. Drugs were involved in every layer of street life.

"Tequila Watson," a court official announced at last.

The prisoner was helped to his feet by another official and moved slowly forward.

"Mr. Watson, you are charged with murder," the judge said loudly. "How old are you?"

"Twenty," Tequila said, looking down.

After the reading of the charge, the courtroom had gone quiet. The other criminals looked at Tequila with admiration; the lawyers and policemen were curious.

"Can you afford a lawyer?"

"No."

"I didn't think you could," the judge said quietly to himself, and looked at the defense table, where usually many PDs, the badly-paid lawyers from the Office of the Public Defender, were waiting to defend the poor. At that moment, however, there was only one: Clay Carter. He had come into the courtroom to pick

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up a few papers and realized, with horror, that the judge was looking at him.

"Mr. Carter?" the judge said.

Clay swallowed hard. A week earlier, he had finished a murder case which had lasted for almost three years, and he didn't want to defend another one. But he was the only PD in the room, and he couldn't show weakness and refuse to accept a case, especially with policemen and prosecuting lawyers watching. He walked calmly to the bench, took the file from the judge, quickly looked through it, and said, "We'll plead not guilty, Your Honor*."

"Thank you, Mr. Carter. And you'll be this man's lawyer?"

"For now, yes." Clay was already planning to unload this case on someone else at the OPD.

The judge thanked him again and began looking for the next file. Clay, meanwhile, sat next to Tequila Watson at the defense table, and got as much information from him as the young man was willing to give—which was very little. Clay promised to visit the jail the next day for a longer interview; then, grabbing his old, scratched briefcase, he hurried away.

If Clay Carter had ever been attracted to a career in the OPD, he couldn't now remember why. He had been a PD for almost exactly five years and, at the age of thirty-one, he felt tired and exhausted. He was trapped in an office that he was ashamed to show his friends, wanted to leave but didn't know how, and now had another senseless murder case to defend. In the elevator, he cursed himself for his bad luck and stupidity, and promised himself that he would leave and find a better job as soon as he could—the same promise that he had made to himself every day for the last five years.

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* Your Honor: formal words of respect used by lawyers when talking to a judge