

John Grisham

A Time to Kill

Billy Ray Cobb was the younger and smaller of the two rednecks. At twenty-three he was already a three-year veteran of the state penitentiary at Parchman. Possession, with intent to sell. He was a lean, tough little punk who had survived prison by somehow maintaining a ready supply of drugs that he sold and sometimes gave to the blacks and the guards for protection. In the year since his release he had continued to prosper, and his small-time narcotics business had elevated him to the position of one of the more affluent rednecks in Ford County. He was a businessman, with employees, obligations, deals, everything but taxes. Down at the Ford place in Clanton he was known as the last man in recent history to pay cash for a new pickup truck. Sixteen thousand cash, for a custom-built, four-wheel drive, canary yellow, luxury Ford pickup. The fancy chrome wheels and mudgrip racing tires had been received in a business deal. The rebel flag hanging across the rear window had been stolen by Cobb from a drunken fraternity boy at an Ole Miss football game. The pickup was Billy Ray's most prized possession. He sat on the tailgate drinking a beer, smoking a joint, watching his friend Willard take his turn with the black girl.

Willard was four years older and a dozen years slower. He was generally a harmless sort who had never been in serious trouble and had never been seriously employed. Maybe an occasional fight with a night in jail, but nothing that would distinguish him. He called himself a pulpwood cutter, but a bad back customarily kept him out of the woods. He had hurt his back working on an offshore rig somewhere in the Gulf, and the oil company paid him a nice settlement, which he lost when his ex-wife cleaned him out. His primary vocation was that of a part-time employee of Billy Ray Cobb, who didn't pay much but was liberal with his dope. For the first time in years Willard could always get his hands on something. And he always needed something. He'd been that way since he hurt his back.

She was ten, and small for her age. She lay on her elbows, which were stuck and bound together with yellow nylon rope. Her legs were spread grotesquely with the right foot tied tight to an oak sapling and the left to a rotting, leaning post of a long-neglected fence. The ski rope had cut into her ankles and the blood ran down her legs. Her face was bloody and swollen, with one eye bulging and closed and the other eye half open so she could see the other white man sitting on the truck. She did not look at the man on top of her. He was breathing hard and sweating and cursing. He was hurting her.

When he finished, he slapped her and laughed, and the other man laughed in return, then they laughed harder and rolled around the grass by the truck like two crazy men, screaming and laughing. She turned away from them and cried softly, careful to keep herself quiet. She had been slapped earlier for crying and screaming. They promised to kill her if she didn't keep quiet. They grew tired of laughing and pulled themselves onto the tailgate, where Willard cleaned himself with the little nigger's shirt, which by now was soaked with blood and sweat. Cobb handed him a cold beer from the cooler and commented on the humidity. They watched her as she sobbed and made strange, quiet sounds, then became still. Cobb's beer was half empty, and it was not cold anymore. He threw it at the girl. It hit her in the stomach, splashing white foam, and it rolled off in

the dirt near some other cans, all of which had originated from the same cooler. For two six-packs now they had thrown their half-empty cans at her and laughed. Willard had trouble with the target, but Cobb was fairly accurate. They were not ones to waste beer, but the heavier cans could be felt better and it was great fun to watch the foam shoot everywhere.

The warm beer mixed with the dark blood and ran down her face and neck into a puddle behind her head. She did not move.

Willard asked Cobb if he thought she was dead. Cobb opened another beer and explained that she was not dead because niggers generally could not be killed by kicking and beating and raping. It took much more, something like a knife or a gun or a rope to dispose of a nigger. Although he had never taken part in such a killing, he had lived with a bunch of niggers in prison and knew all about them. They were always killing each other, and they always used a weapon of some sort. Those who were just beaten and raped never died. Some of the whites were beaten and raped, and some of them died. But none of the niggers. Their heads were harder. Willard seemed satisfied.

Willard asked what he planned to do now that they were through with her. Cobb sucked on his joint, chased it with beer, and said he wasn't through. He bounced from the tailgate and staggered across the small clearing to where she was tied. He cursed her and screamed at her to wake up, then he poured cold beer in her face, laughing like a crazy man.

She watched him as he walked around the tree on her right side, and she stared at him as he stared between her legs. When he lowered his pants she turned to the left and closed her eyes. He was hurting her again.

She looked out through the woods and saw something -a man running wildly through the vines and underbrush. It was her daddy, yelling and pointing at her and coming desperately to save her. She cried out for him, and he disappeared. She fell asleep.

When she awoke one of the men was lying under the tailgate, the other under a tree. They were asleep. Her arms and legs were numb. The blood and beer and urine had mixed with the dirt underneath her to form a sticky paste that glued her small body to the ground and crackled when she moved and wiggled. Escape, she thought, but her mightiest efforts moved her only a few inches to the right. Her feet were tied so high her buttocks barely touched the ground. Her legs and arms were so deadened they refused to move.

She searched the woods for her daddy and quietly called his name. She waited, then slept again.

When she awoke the second time they were up and moving around. The tall one staggered to her with a small knife. He grabbed her left ankle and sawed furiously on the rope until it gave way. Then he freed the right leg, and she curled into a fetal position with her back to them.

Cobb strung a length of quarter-inch ski rope over a limb and tied a loop in one end with a slip knot. He grabbed her and put the noose around her head, then walked across the clearing with the other end of the rope and sat on the tailgate, where Willard was smoking a fresh joint and grinning at Cobb for what he was about to do. Cobb pulled the rope tight, then gave a vicious yank, bouncing the little nude body along the ground and stopping it directly under the limb. She gagged and coughed, so he kindly loosened the rope to spare her a few more minutes. He tied the rope to the bumper and opened another beer.

They sat on the tailgate drinking, smoking, and staring at her. They had been at the lake most of the day, where Cobb had a friend with a boat and some extra girls who were supposed to be easy but turned out to be untouchable. Cobb had been generous with his drugs and beer, but the girls did not reciprocate. Frustrated, they left the lake and were driving to no place in particular when they happened across the girl. She was walking along a gravel road with a sack of groceries when Willard nailed her in the back of the head with a beer can.

"You gonna do it?" asked Willard, his eyes red and glazed.

Cobb hesitated. "Naw, I'll let you do it. It was your idea."

Willard took a drag on his joint, then spit and said, "Wasn't my idea. You're the expert on killin' niggers. Do it."

Cobb untied the rope from the bumper and pulled it tight. It peeled bark from the limb and sprinkled fine bits of elm around the girl, who was watching them carefully now. She coughed. Suddenly, she heard something-like a car with loud pipes. The two men turned quickly and looked down the dirt road to the highway in the distance. They cursed and scrambled around, one slamming the tailgate and the other running toward her. He tripped and landed near her. They cursed each other while they grabbed her, removed the rope from her neck, dragged her to the pickup and threw her over the tailgate into the bed of the truck. Cobb slapped her and threatened to kill her if she did not lie still and keep quiet. He said he would take her home if she stayed down and did as told; otherwise, they would kill her. They slammed the doors and sped onto the dirt road. She was going home. She passed out.

Cobb and Willard waved at the Firebird with the loud pipes as it passed them on the narrow dirt road. Willard checked the back to make sure the little nigger was lying down. Cobb turned onto the highway and raced away.

"What now?" Willard asked nervously.

"Don't know," Cobb answered nervously. "But we gotta do something fast before she gets blood all over my truck. Look at her back there, she's bleedin' all over the place."

Willard thought for a minute while he finished a beer. "Let's throw her off a bridge," he said proudly.

"Good idea. Damned good idea." Cobb slammed on the brakes. "Gimme a beer," he ordered Willard, who stumbled out of the truck and fetched two beers from the back.

"She's even got blood on the cooler," he reported as they raced off again.

Gwen Hailey sensed something horrible. Normally she would have sent one of the three boys to the store, but they were being punished by their father and had been sentenced to weed-pulling in the garden. Tonya had been to the store before by herself-it was only a mile away-and had proven reliable. But after two hours Gwen sent the boys to look for their little sister. They figured she was down at the Pounders' house playing with the many Pounders kids, or maybe she had ventured past the store to visit her best friend, Bessie Pierson.

Mr. Bates at the store said she had come and gone an hour earlier. Jarvis, the middle boy, found a sack of groceries beside the road.

Gwen called her husband at the paper mill, then loaded Carl Lee, Jr., into the car and began driving the gravel roads around the store. They drove to a settlement of ancient shotgun houses on Graham Plantation to check with an aunt. They stopped at Broadway's store a mile from Bates Grocery and were told by a group of old black men that she had not been seen. They crisscrossed the gravel roads and dusty field roads for three square miles around their house.

Cobb could not find a bridge unoccupied by niggers with fishing poles. Every bridge they approached had four or five niggers hanging off the sides with large straw hats and cane poles, and under every bridge on the banks there would be another group sitting on buckets with the same straw hats and cane poles, motionless except for an occasional swat at a fly or a slap at a mosquito. He was scared now. Willard had passed out and was of no help, and he was left alone to dispose of the girl in such a way that she could never tell. Willard snored as he frantically drove the gravel roads and county roads in search of a bridge or ramp on some river where he could stop and toss her without being seen by half a dozen niggers with straw hats. He looked in the mirror and saw her trying to stand. He slammed his brakes, and she crashed into the front of the bed, just under the window. Willard ricocheted off the dash into the floorboard, where he continued to snore. Cobb cursed them both equally.

Lake Chatulla was nothing more than a huge, shallow, man-made mudhole with a grass-covered dam running exactly one mile along one end. It sat in the far southwest corner of Ford County, with a few acres in Van Buren County. In the spring it would hold the distinction of being the largest

body of water in Mississippi. But by late summer the rains were long gone, and the sun would cook the shallow water until the lake would dehydrate. Its once ambitious shorelines would retreat and move much closer together, creating a depthless basin of reddish brown water. It was fed from all directions by innumerable streams, creeks, sloughs, and a couple of currents large enough to be named rivers. The existence of all these tributaries necessarily gave rise to a good number of bridges near the lake.

It was over these bridges the yellow pickup flew in an all-out effort to find a suitable place to unload an unwanted passenger. Cobb was desperate. He knew of one other bridge, a narrow wooden one over Foggy Creek. As he approached, he saw niggers with cane poles, so he turned off a side road and stopped the truck. He lowered the tailgate, dragged her out, and threw her in a small ravine lined with kudzu.

Carl Lee Hailey did not hurry home. Gwen was easily excited, and she had called the mill numerous times when she thought the children had been kidnapped. He punched out at quitting time, and made the thirty-minute drive home in thirty minutes. Anxiety hit him when he turned onto his gravel drive and saw the patrol car parked next to the front porch. Other cars belonging to Owen's family were scattered along the long drive and in the yard, and there was one car he didn't recognize. It had cane poles sticking out the side windows, and there were at least seven straw hats sitting in it.

Where were Tonya and the boys?

As he opened the front door he heard Gwen crying. To his right in the small living room he found a crowd huddled above a small figure lying on the couch. The child was covered with wet towels and surrounded by crying relatives. As he moved to the couch the crying stopped and the crowd backed away. Only Gwen stayed by the girl. She softly stroked her hair. He knelt beside the couch and touched the girl's shoulder. He spoke to his daughter, and she tried to smile. Her face was bloody pulp covered with knots and lacerations. Both eyes were swollen shut and bleeding. His eyes watered as he looked at her tiny body, completely wrapped in towels and bleeding from ankles to forehead.

Carl Lee asked Gwen what happened. She began shaking and wailing, and was led to the kitchen by her brother. Carl Lee stood and turned to the crowd and demanded to know what happened. Silence.

He asked for the third time. The deputy, Willie Hastings, one of Gwen's cousins, stepped forward and told Carl Lee that some people were fishing down by Foggy Creek when they saw Tonya lying in the middle of the road. She told them her daddy's name, and they brought her home.

Hastings shut up and stared at his feet.

Carl Lee stared at him and waited. Everyone else stopped breathing and watched the floor.

"What happened, Willie?" Carl Lee yelled as he stared at the deputy.

Hastings spoke slowly, and while staring out the window repeated what Tonya had told her mother about the white men and their pickup, and the rope and the trees, and being hurt when they got on her. -Hastings stopped when he heard the siren from the ambulance.

The crowd filed solemnly through the front door and waited on the porch, where they watched the crew unload a stretcher and head for the house.

The paramedics stopped in the yard when the front door opened and Carl Lee walked out with his daughter in his arms. He whispered gently to her as huge tears dripped from his chin. He walked to the rear of the ambulance and stepped inside. The paramedics closed the door and carefully removed her from his embrace.

Ozzie Walls was the only black sheriff in Mississippi. There had been a few others in recent history, but for the moment he was the only one. He took great pride in that fact, since Ford County was seventy-four percent white and the other black sheriffs had been from much blacker counties. Not since Reconstruction had a black sheriff been elected in a white county in Mississippi.

He was raised in Ford County, and he was kin to most of the blacks and a few of the whites. After desegregation in the late sixties, he was a member of the first mixed graduating class at Clanton High School. He wanted to play football nearby at Ole Miss, but there were already two blacks on the team. He starred instead at Alcorn State, and was a defensive tackle for the Rams when a knee injury sent him back to Clanton. He missed football, but enjoyed being the high sheriff, especially at election time when he received more . white votes than his white opponents. The white kids loved him because he was a hero, a football star who had played on TV and had his picture in magazines. Their parents respected him and voted for him because he was a tough cop who did not discriminate between black punks and white

Sunks. The white politicians supported him because, since e became the sheriff, the Justice Department stayed out of Ford County. The blacks adored him because he was Ozzie, one of their own.

He skipped supper and waited in his office at the jail for Hastings to report from the Hailey house. He had a suspect. Billy Ray Cobb was no stranger to the sheriffs office. Ozzie knew he sold drugs- he just couldn't catch him. He also knew Cobb had a mean streak.

The dispatcher called in the deputies, and as they reported to the jail Ozzie gave them instructions to locate, but not arrest, Billy Ray Cobb. There were twelve deputies in all -nine white and three black. They fanned out across the county in search of a fancy yellow Ford pickup with a rebel flag in the rear window.

When Hastings arrived he and the sheriff left for the Ford County hospital. As usual, Hastings drove and Ozzie gave orders on the radio. In the waiting room on the second floor they found the Hailey clan. Aunts, uncles, grandparents, friends, and strangers crowded into the small room and some waited in the narrow hallway. There were whispers and quiet tears. Tonya was in surgery. Carl Lee sat on a cheap plastic couch in a dark corner with Gwen next to him and the boys next to her. He stared at the floor and did not notice the crowd. Gwen laid her head on his shoulder and cried softly. The boys sat rigidly with their hands on knees, occasionally glancing at their father as if waiting on words of reassurance.

Ozzie worked his way through the crowd, quietly shaking hands and patting backs and whispering that he would catch them. He knelt before Carl Lee and Gwen. "How is she?" he asked. Carl Lee did not see him. Gwen cried louder and the boys sniffed and wiped tears. He patted Gwen on the knee and stood. One of her brothers led Ozzie and Hastings out of the room into the hall, away from the family. He shook Ozzie's hand and thanked him for coming.

"How is she?" Ozzie asked.

"Not too good. She's in surgery and most likely will be there for a while. She's got broken fJones and a bad concussion. She's beat up real bad. There's rope burns on her neck like they tried to hang her."

"Was she raped?" he asked, certain of the answer.

"Yeah. She told her momma they took turns on her and hurt her real bad. Doctors confirmed it."

"How's Carl Lee and Gwen?"

"They're tore up pretty bad. I think they're in shock. Carl Lee ain't said a word since he got here."

, JDzzie assured him they would find the two men, and it wouldn't take long, and when they found them they would be locked up someplace safe. The brother suggested he should hide them in another jail, for their own safety.

Three miles out of Clanton, Ozzie pointed to a gravel driveway. "Pull in there," he told Hastings, who turned off the

highway and drove into the front yard of a dilapidated house trailer. It was almost dark.

Ozzie took his night stick and banged violently on the front door. "Open up, Bumpous!"

The trailer shook and Bumpous scrambled to the bathroom to flush a fresh joint.

"Open up, Bumpous!" Ozzie banged. "I know you're in there. Open up or I'll kick in the door."

Bumpous yanked the door open and Ozzie walked in. "You know, Bumpous, evertime I visit you I smell somethin' funny and the commode's flushin'. Get some clothes on. I gotta job for you."

"W-what?"

"I'll explain it outside where I can breathe. Just get some clothes on and hurry."

"What if I don't want to?"

"Fine. I'll see your parole officer tomorrow."

"I'll be out in a minute."

Ozzie smiled and walked to his car. Bobby Bumpous was one of his favorites. Since his parole two years earlier, he had led a reasonably clean life, occasionally succumbing to the lure of an easy drug sale for a quick buck. Ozzie watched him like a hawk and knew of such transactions, and Bumpous knew Ozzie knew; therefore, Bumpous was usually most eager to help his friend, Sheriff Walls. The plan was to eventually use Bumpous to nail Billy Ray Cobb for dealing, but that would be postponed for now.

After a few minutes he marched outside, still tucking his shirttail and zipping his pants. "Who you lookin' for?" he demanded.

"Billy Ray Cobb."

"That's no problem. You can find him without me."

"Shut up and listen. We think Cobb was involved in a rape this afternoon. A black girl was raped by two white men, and I think Cobb was there."

"Cobb ain't into rape, Sheriff. He's into drugs, remember?"

"Shut up and listen. You find Cobb and spend some time with him. Five minutes ago his truck was spotted at Huey's. Buy him a beer. Shoot some pool, roll dice, whatever. Find out what he did today. Who was he with? Where'd he go? You know how he likes to talk, right?"

"Right."

"Call the dispatcher when you find him. They'll call me. I'll be somewhere close. You understand?"

"Sure, Sheriff. No problem."

"Any questions?"

"Yeah. I'm broke. Who's gonna pay for this?"

Ozzie handed him a twenty and left. Hastings drove in the direction of Huey's, down by the lake.

"You sure you can trust him?" Hastings asked. . "Who?"

"That Bumpous kid."

"Sure I trust him. He's proved very reliable since he was paroled. He's a good kid tryin' to go straight, for the most part. He supports his local sheriff and would do anything I ask."

"Why?"

"Because I caught him with ten ounces of pot a year ago. He'd been outta jail about a year when I caught his brother with an ounce, and I told him he was lookin' at thirty years. He started cryin' and carryin' on, cried all night in his cell. By mornin' he was ready to talk. Told me his supplier was his brother, Bobby. So I let him go and went to see Bobby. I knocked on his door and I could hear the commode flushin'. He wouldn't come to the door, so I kicked it in. I found him in his underwear in the bathroom tryin' to unstop the commode. There was dope all over the place. Don't know how much he flushed, but most of it was comin' back out in the overflow. Scared him so bad he wet his drawers."

"You kiddin'?"

"Nope. The kid pissed all over himself. He was a sight standin' there with wet drawers, a plunger in one hand, dope in the other, and the room fillin' up with commode water."

"What'd you do?"

"Threatened to kill him."

"What'd he do?"

"Started cryin'. Cried like a baby. Cried 'bout his mamma and prison and all this and that. Promised he'd never screw up again."

"You arrest him?"

"Naw, I just couldn't. I talked real ugly to him and threatened him some more. I put him on probation right there in his bathroom. He's been fun to work with ever since."

They drove by Huey's and saw Cobb's truck in the gravel parking lot with a dozen other pickups and four-wheel drives. They parked behind a black church on a hill up the highway from Huey's, where they had a good view of the honky tonk, or tonk, as it was affectionately called by the patrons. Another patrol car hid behind some trees at the other end of the highway. Moments later Bumpous flew by and wheeled into the parking lot. He locked his brakes, spraying gravel and dust, then backed next to Cobb's truck. He looked around and casually entered Huey's. Thirty minutes later the dispatcher advised Ozzie that the informant had found the subject, a male white, at Huey's, an establishment on Highway 305 near the lake. Within minutes two more patrol cars were hidden close by. They waited.

"What makes you so sure it's Cobb?" Hastings asked.

"I ain't sure. I just got a hunch. The little girl said it was a truck with shiny wheels and big tires."

"That narrows it down to two thousand."

"She also said it was yellow, looked new, and had a big flag hangin' in the rear window."

"That brings it down to two hundred."

"Maybe less than that. How many of those are as mean as Billy Ray Cobb?"

"What if it ain't him?"

"It is."

"If it ain't?"

"We'll know shortly. He's got a big mouth, 'specially when he's drinkin'."

For two hours they waited and watched pickups come and go. Truck drivers, pulpwood cutters, factory workers, and farmhands parked their pickups and jeeps in the gravel and strutted inside to drink, shoot pool, listen to the band, but mainly to look for stray women. Some would leave and walk next door to Ann's Lounge, where they would stay for a few minutes and return to Huey's. Ann's Lounge was darker both inside and out, and it lacked the colorful beer signs and live music that made Huey's such a hit with the locals. Ann's was known for its drug traffic, whereas Huey's had it all- music, women, happy hours, poker machines, dice, dancing, and plenty of fights. One brawl spilled through the door into the parking lot, where a group of wild rednecks kicked and clawed each other at random until they grew winded and returned to the dice table.

"Hope that wasn't Bumpous," observed the sheriff.

The restrooms inside were small and nasty, and most of the patrons found it necessary to relieve themselves between the pickups in the parking lot. This was especially true on Mondays when ten-cent beer night drew rednecks from four counties and every truck in the parking lot received at least three sprayings. About once a week an innocent passing motorist would get shocked by something he or she saw in the parking lot, and Ozzie would be forced to make an arrest. Otherwise, he left the places alone.

Both tonks were in violation of numerous laws. There was gambling, drugs, illegal whiskey, minors, they refused to close on time, etc. Shortly after he was elected the first time Ozzie made the mistake, due in part to a hasty campaign promise, of closing all the honky tonks in the county. It was a horrible mistake. The crime rate soared. The jail was packed. The court dockets multiplied. The rednecks united and drove in caravans to Clanton, where they parked around the courthouse on the square. Hundreds of them. Every night they invaded the square, drinking, fighting, playing loud music, and shouting obscenities at the horrified town folk. Each morning the square resembled a landfill with cans and bottles thrown everywhere. He closed the black tonks too, and break-ins, burglaries, and stabbings tripled in one month. There were two murders in one week.

Finally, with the city under siege, a group of local ministers met secretly with Ozzie and begged him to ease up on the tonks. He politely reminded them that during the campaign they had insisted on the closings. They admitted they were wrong and pleaded for relief. Yes, they would support him in the next election. Ozzie relented, and life returned to normal in Ford County.

Ozzie was not pleased that the establishments thrived in his county, but he was convinced beyond any doubt that his

law-abiding constituents were much safer when the tonks were open.

At ten-thirty the dispatcher radioed that the informant was on the phone and wanted to see the sheriff. Ozzie gave his location, and a minute later they watched Bumpous emerge and stagger to his truck. He spun tires, slung gravel, and raced toward the church.

"He's drunk," said Hastings.

He wheeled through the church parking lot and came to a screeching stop a few feet from the patrol car. "Howdy, Sheriff!" he yelled.

Ozzie walked to the pickup. "What took so long?"

"You told me to take all night."

"You found him two hours ago."

"That's true, Sheriff, but have you ever tried to spend twenty dollars on beer when it's fifty cents a can?"

"You drunk?"

"Naw, just havin' a good time. Could I have another twenty?"

"What'd you find out?"

" 'Bout what?"

"Cobb!"

"Oh, he's in there all right."

"I know he's in there! What else?"

Bumpous quit smiling and looked at the tonk in the distance. "He's laughin' about it, Sheriff. It's a big joke. Said he finally found a nigger who was a virgin. Somebody asked how old she was, and Cobb said eight or nine. Everybody laughed."

Hastings closed his eyes and dropped his head. Ozzie gritted his teeth and looked away. "What else did he say?"

"He's bad drunk. He won't remember any of it in the mornin'. Said she was a cute little nigger."

"Who was with him?"

"Pete Willard."

"Is he in there?"

"Yep, they're both laughin' about it."

"Where are they?"

"Left-hand side, next to the pinball machines."

Ozzie smiled. "Okay, Bumpous. You did good. Get lost."

Hastings called the dispatcher with the two names. The dispatcher relayed the message to Deputy Looney, who was parked in the street in front of the home of County Judge Percy Bullard. Looney rang the doorbell and handed the judge two affidavits and two arrest warrants. Bullard scribbled on the warrants and returned them to Looney, who thanked His Honor and left. Twenty minutes later Looney handed the warrants to Ozzie behind the church.

At exactly eleven, the band quit in mid-song, the dice disappeared, the dancers froze, the cue balls stopped rolling, and someone turned on the lights. All eyes followed the big sheriff as he and his men swaggered slowly across the dance floor to a table by the pinball machines. Cobb, Willard, and two others sat in a booth, the table littered with empty beer cans^ Ozzie walked to the table and grinned at Cobb.

"I'm sorry, sir, but we don't allow niggers in here," Cobb blurted out, and the four burst into laughter. Ozzie kept grinning.

When the laughing stopped, Ozzie said, "You boys havin' a good time, Billy Ray?"

"We was."

"Looks like it. I hate to break things up, but you and Mr. Willard need to come with me."

"Where we goin'?" Willard asked.

"For a ride."

"I ain't movin'," Cobb vowed. With that, the other two scooted from the booth and joined the spectators.

"I'm placin' you both under arrest," Ozzie said.

"You got warrants?" Cobb asked.

Hastings produced the warrants, and Ozzie threw them among the beer cans. "Yeah, we got warrants. Now get up."

Willard stared desperately at Cobb, who sipped a beer and said, "I ain't goin' to jail."

Looney handed Ozzie the longest, blackest nightstick ever used in Ford County. Willard was panic-stricken. Ozzie cocked it and struck the center of the table, sending beer and cans and foam in all directions. Willard bolted upright, slapped his wrists together and thrust them at Looney, who was waiting with the handcuffs. He was dragged outside and thrown into a patrol car.

Ozzie tapped his left palm with the stick and grinned at

Cobb. "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say will be used against you in court.

You have the right to a lawyer. If you can't afford one, the state'll furnish one. Any questions?"

"Yeah, what time is it?"

"Time to go to jail, big man."

"Go to hell, nigger."

Ozzie grabbed his hair and lifted him from the booth, then drove his face into the floor. He jammed a knee into his spine and slid his nightstick under his throat, and pulled upward while driving the knee deeper into his back. Cobb squealed until the stick began crushing his larynx.

The handcuffs were slapped into place, and Ozzie dragged him by his hair across the dance floor, out the door, across the gravel and threw him into the back seat with Willard.

News of the rape spread quickly. More friends and relatives crowded into the waiting room and the halls around it. Tonya was out of surgery and listed as critical. Ozzie talked to Gwen's brother in the hall and told of the arrests. Yes, they were the ones, he was sure.

Jake Brigance rolled across his wife and staggered to the small bathroom a few feet from his bed, where he searched and groped in the dark for the screaming alarm clock. He found it where he had left it, and killed it with a quick and violent slap. It was 5:30 A.M., Wednesday, May 15.

He stood in the dark for a moment, breathless, terrified, his heart pounding rapidly, staring at the fluorescent numbers glowing at him from the face of the clock, a clock he hated. Its piercing scream could be heard down the street. He flirted with cardiac arrest every morning at this time when the thing erupted. On occasion, about twice a year, he was successful in shoving Carla onto the floor, and she would maybe turn it off before returning to bed. Most of the time, however, she was not sympathetic. She thought he was crazy for getting up at such an hour.

The clock sat on the windowsill so that Jake was required to move around a bit before it was silenced. Once up, Jake would not permit himself to crawl back under the covers. It was one of his rules. At one time the alarm was on the nightstand, and the volume was reduced. Carla would reach and turn it off before Jake heard anything. Then he would sleep until seven or eight and ruin his entire day. He would miss being in the office by seven, which was another rule. The alarm stayed in the bathroom and served its purpose.

Jake stepped to the sink and splashed cold water on his face and hair. He switched on the light and gasped in horror at the sight in the mirror. His straight brown hair shot in all directions, and the hairline had receded at least two inches during the night. Either that or his forehead had grown. His eyes were matted and swollen with the white stuff packed in the corners. A seam in a blanket left a bright red scar along the left side of his face. He touched, then rubbed it and wondered if it would

go away. With his right hand he pushed his hair back and inspected the hairline. At thirty-two, he had no gray hair. Gray hair was not the problem. The problem was pattern baldness, which Jake had richly inherited

from both sides of his family. He longed for a full, thick hairline beginning an inch above his eyebrows. He still had plenty of hair, Carla told him. But it wouldn't last long at the rate it was disappearing. She also assured him he was as handsome as ever, and he believed her. She had explained that a receding hairline gave him a look of maturity that was essential for a young attorney. He believed that too.

But what about old, bald attorneys, or even mature, middle-aged bald attorneys? Why couldn't the hair return after he grew wrinkles and gray sideburns and looked very mature?

Jake pondered these things in the shower. He took quick showers, and he shaved and dressed quickly. He had to be at the Coffee Shop at 6:00 A.M.-another rule. He turned on lights and slammed and banged drawers and closet doors in an effort to arouse Carla. This was the morning ritual during the summer when she was not teaching school. He had explained to her numerous times that she had all day to catch up on any lost sleep, and that these early moments should be spent together. She moaned and tunneled deeper under the covers. Once dressed, Jake jumped on the bed with all fours and kissed her in the ear, down the neck, and all over the face until she finally swung at him. Then he yanked the covers off the bed and laughed as she curled up and shivered and begged for the blankets. He held them and admired her dark, tanned, thin, almost perfect legs. The bulky nightshirt covered nothing below the waist, and a hundred lewd thoughts danced before him. About once a month this ritual would get out of hand. She would not protest, and the blankets would be jointly removed. On those mornings Jake undressed even quicker and broke at least three of his rules. That's how Hanna was conceived.

But not this morning. He covered his wife, kissed her gently, and turned out the lights. She breathed easier, and fell asleep.

Down the hall he quietly opened Hanna's door and knelt beside her. She was four, the only child, and there would be no others. She lay in her bed surrounded by dolls and stuffed animals. He kissed her lightly on the cheek. She was as beautiful as her mother, and the two were identical in looks and manners. They had large bluish-gray eyes that could cry instantly, if necessary. They wore their dark hair the same way-had it cut by the same person at the same time. They even dressed alike.

Jake adored the two women in his life. He kissed the second one goodbye and went to the kitchen to make coffee for Carla. On his way out he released Max, the mutt, into the backyard, where she simultaneously relieved herself and barked at Mrs. Pickle's cat next door.

Few people attacked the morning like Jake Brigance. He walked briskly to the end of the driveway and got the morning papers for Carla. It was dark, clear, and cool with the promise of summer rapidly approaching.

He studied the darkness up and down Adams Street, then turned and admired his house. Two homes in Ford County were on the National Register of Historic Places, and Jake Brigance owned one of them. Although it was heavily mortgaged, he was proud of it nonetheless. It was a nineteenth-century Victorian built by a retired railroad man who died on the first Christmas Eve he spent in his new home. The facade was a huge, centered gable with hipped roof over a wide, inset front porch. Under the gable a small portico covered with bargeboard hung gently over the porch. The five supporting pillars were round and painted white and slate blue. Each column bore a handmade floral carving, each with a different flower-daffodils, irises, and sunflowers. The railing between the pillars was filled with lavish lacework. Upstairs, three bay windows opened onto a small balcony, and to the left of the balcony an octagonal tower with stained-glass windows protruded and rose above the gable until it peaked with an iron-crested finial. Below the tower and to the left of the porch, a wide, graceful veranda with ornamental railing extended from the house