

The background of the cover is a night sky filled with stars and a soft, glowing light source on the horizon, likely the sun or moon, creating a lens flare effect. Below the horizon, a dark, silhouetted landscape of trees and a path is visible.

JOHN
GRISHAM

A NOVEL

A TIME FOR
MERCY

ALSO BY JOHN GRISHAM

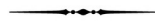
A Time to Kill
The Firm
The Pelican Brief
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Theodore Boone: Kid Lawyer
Theodore Boone: The Abduction
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Theodore Boone: The Activist
Theodore Boone: The Fugitive
Theodore Boone: The Scandal
Theodore Boone: The Accomplice

JOHN
GRISHAM



A
TIME
FOR
MERCY



DOUBLEDAY
New York

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Chapter 55

Author's Note

To the memory of

SONNY MEHTA

Knopf Chairman, Editor in Chief, Publisher

1

The unhappy little home was out in the country, some six miles south of Clanton on an old county road that went nowhere in particular. The house could not be seen from the road and was accessed by a winding gravel drive that dipped and curved and at night caused approaching headlights to sweep through the front windows and doors as if to warn those waiting inside. The seclusion of the house added to the imminent horror.

It was long after midnight on an early Sunday when the headlights finally appeared. They washed through the house and cast ominous, silent shadows on the walls, then went away as the car dipped before its final approach. Those inside should have been asleep for hours, but sleep was not possible during these awful nights. On the sofa in the den, Josie took a deep breath, said a quick prayer, and eased to the window to watch the car. Was it weaving and lurching as usual, or was it under control? Was he drunk as always on these nights or could he have throttled back on the drinking? She wore a racy negligee to catch his attention and perhaps alter his mood from violence to romance. She had worn it before and he had once liked it.

The car stopped beside the house and she watched him get out. He staggered and stumbled, and she braced herself for what was to come. She went to the kitchen where the light was on and waited. Beside the door and partially hidden in a corner was an aluminum baseball bat that belonged to her son. She had placed it there an hour earlier for protection, just in case he went after her kids. She had prayed for the courage to use it but still had doubts. He fell against the kitchen door and then rattled the knob as if it were locked; it was not. He finally kicked it open and it slammed into the refrigerator.

Stuart was a sloppy, violent drunk. His pale Irish skin turned red, his cheeks were crimson, and his eyes glowed with a whiskey-lit fire that

she had seen too many times. At thirty-four, he was graying and balding and tried to cover it up with a bad comb-over, which after a night of bar-hopping left long strands of hair hanging below his ears. His face had no cuts or bruises, perhaps a good sign, perhaps not. He liked to fight in the honky-tonks, and after a rough night he usually licked his wounds and went straight to bed. But if there had been no fights he often came home looking for a brawl.

“The hell you doin’ up?” he snarled as he tried to close the door behind him.

As calmly as possible, Josie said, “Just waitin’ on you, dear. You okay?”

“I don’t need you to wait on me. What time is it, two in the mornin’?”

She smiled sweetly as if all was well. A week earlier, she had decided to go to bed and wait him out there. He came home late and went upstairs and threatened her children.

“About two,” she said softly. “Let’s go to bed.”

“What’re you wearin’ that thing for? You look like a real slut. Somebody been over here tonight?”

A common accusation these days. “Of course not,” she said. “I’m just ready for bed.”

“You’re a whore.”

“Come on, Stu. I’m sleepy. Let’s go to bed.”

“Who is he?” he growled as he fell back against the door.

“Who is who? There’s no one. I’ve been here all night with the kids.”

“You’re a lyin’ bitch, you know that?”

“I’m not lyin’, Stu. Let’s go to bed. It’s late.”

“I heard tonight that somebody saw John Albert’s truck out here coupla days ago.”

“And who is John Albert?”

“And who is John Albert, asks the little slut? You know damned well who John Albert is.” He moved away from the door and took steps toward her, unsteady steps, and he tried to brace himself with the counter. He pointed at her and said, “You’re a little whore and you got old boyfriends hangin’ around. I’ve warned you.”

“You’re my only boyfriend, Stuart, I’ve told you that a thousand times. Why can’t you believe me?”

“Because you’re a liar and I’ve caught you lyin’ before. Remember that credit card. You bitch.”

“Come on, Stu, that was last year and we got through it.”

He lunged and grabbed her wrist with his left hand and swung hard at her face. With an open hand he slapped her across the jaw, a loud popping sound that was sickening, flesh on flesh. She screamed in pain and shock. She had told herself to do anything but scream because her kids were upstairs behind a locked door, listening, hearing it all.

“Stop it, Stu!” she shrieked as she grabbed her face and tried to catch her breath. “No more hittin’! I promised you I’m leavin’ and I swear I will!”

He roared with laughter and said, “Oh really? And where you goin’ now, you little slut? Back to the camper in the woods? You gonna live in your car again?” He yanked her wrist, spun her around, threw a thick forearm around her neck, and growled into her ear. “You ain’t got no place to go, bitch, not even the trailer park where you was born.” He sprayed hot saliva and the rank odor of stale whiskey and beer into her ear.

She jerked and tried to free herself but he thrust her arm up almost to her shoulders as if trying mightily to snap a bone. She couldn’t help but scream again and she pitied her children as she did so. “You’re breakin’ my arm, Stu! Please stop!”

He lowered her arm an inch or two but pressed her tighter. He hissed into her ear, “Where you goin’? You got a roof over your head, food on the table, a room for those two rotten kids of yours, and you wanna talk about leavin’? I don’t think so.”

She stiffened and wiggled and tried to break free, but he was a powerful man with a crazy temper. “You’re breakin’ my arm, Stu. Please let go!”

Instead, he yanked hard again and she yelled. She kicked back with her bare heel and hit his shin, then spun around and with her left elbow caught him in the ribs. It stunned him for a second, did no damage, but allowed her to pry herself free, knocking over a kitchen chair. More noise to frighten her children.

He charged like a mad bull, grabbed her by the throat, pinned her to the wall, and dug his fingernails into the flesh of her neck. Josie couldn't yell, couldn't swallow or breathe, and the mad glow in his eyes told her this was their last fight. This was the moment he would finally kill her. She tried to kick, missed, and in a flash he threw a hard right hook that landed square on her chin, knocking her out cold. She crumpled to the floor and landed on her back with her legs spread. Her negligee was open, her breasts exposed. He stood for a second or two and admired his handiwork.

"Bitch hit me first," he mumbled, then stepped to the fridge where he found a can of beer. He popped the top, had a sip, wiped his mouth with the back of a hand, and waited to see if she might wake up or whether she was down for the night. She wasn't moving so he stepped closer to make sure she was breathing.

He had been a street brawler all his life and knew the first rule: Nail 'em on the chin and they're out for good.

The house was quiet and still, but he knew the kids were upstairs, hiding and waiting.

—

DREW WAS TWO years older than his sister, Kiera, but puberty, like most normal changes in his life, was coming late. He was sixteen, small for his age and bothered by his lack of size, especially when standing next to his sister, who was struggling through another awkward growth surge. What the two didn't know, yet, was that they had different fathers, and their physical development would never be in sync. Heredity aside, at that moment they were bound together as tightly as any two siblings while they listened in horror as their mother suffered another beating.

The violence was spiraling and the abuse was more frequent. They were begging Josie to leave and she was making promises, but the three of them knew there was no place to go. She assured them things would get better, that Stu was a good man when he wasn't drinking, and she was determined to love him to better health.

No place to go. Their last "home" had been an old camper in the backyard of a distant relative who was embarrassed to have them on his property. All three knew they were surviving life with Stu only because he owned a real house, one with bricks and a tin roof. They were not

hungry, though they still had painful memories of those days, and they were in school. Indeed, school was their sanctuary because he never came near the place. There were issues there—slow academic progress for Drew, too few friends for both of them, old clothes, the free-lunch lines—but at least at school they were away from Stu, and safe.

Even when sober, which, mercifully, was most of the time, he was an unpleasant ass who resented having to support the children. He had none himself because he had never wanted them, and also because his two prior marriages ended not long after they began. He was a bully who thought his home was his castle. The kids were unwelcome guests, perhaps even trespassers, and therefore they should do all the dirty work. With plenty of free labor, he had an endless list of chores, most designed to disguise the fact that he himself was nothing more than a lazy slob. At the slightest infraction, he cursed the kids and threatened them. He bought food and beer for himself and insisted that Josie's meager paychecks cover "their" side of the table.

But the chores and food and intimidation were nothing compared to the violence.

JOSIE WAS BARELY breathing and not moving. He stood above her, looked at her breasts, and as always wished they were larger. Hell, even Kiera had a bigger rack. He smiled at this thought and decided to have a look. He walked through the small dark den and began to climb the stairs, making as much noise as possible to frighten them. Halfway up he called out in a high-pitched, drunken, almost playful voice, "Kiera, oh Kiera..."

In the darkness, she shuddered in fear and squeezed Drew's arm even tighter. Stu lumbered on, his steps landing heavy on the wooden stairs.

"Kiera, oh Kiera..."

He opened Drew's unlocked door first, then slammed it. He turned the knob to Kiera's and it was locked. "Ha, ha, Kiera, I know you're in there. Open the door." He fell against it with his shoulder.

They were sitting together at the end of her narrow bed, staring at the door. Jammed against it was a rusted metal shaft Drew had found in the barn, and with it he had rigged a doorstop that they prayed would hold.

One end was wedged against the door, the other against the metal bed frame. When Stu began rattling the lock, Drew and Kiera, as rehearsed, leaned on the metal shaft to increase the pressure. They had practiced this scenario and were almost certain the door would hold. They had also planned an attack if the door came flying open. Kiera would grab an old tennis racket and Drew would yank a small tube of pepper spray out of his pocket and blast away. Josie had bought it for the kids, just in case. Stu might beat them again, but at least they would go down fighting.

He could easily kick in the door. He had done so a month earlier, then raised hell when a new one cost him a hundred dollars. At first he insisted that Josie pay for it, then wanted money from the kids, then finally stopped bitching about it.

Kiera was rigid with fear and crying quietly, but she was also thinking that this was unusual. On the prior occasions when he had come to her room, no one else was at home. There had been no witnesses and he had threatened to kill her if she ever told. Stu had already silenced her mom. Did he plan to harm Drew too, and threaten him?

“Oh Kiera, oh Kiera,” he sang stupidly as he fell against the door again. His voice was a little softer, as if he might be giving up.

They pressed on the metal shaft and waited for an explosion, but he went silent. Then he retreated, his steps fading on the stairs. All was quiet.

And not a sound from their mother, which meant the end of the world. She was down there, either dead or unconscious because otherwise he would not have climbed the stairs, not without a nasty fight. Josie would claw his eyes out in his sleep if he harmed her children again.

—

SECONDS AND MINUTES dragged by. Kiera stopped crying, and both of them sat on the edge of the bed, waiting for something, a noise, a voice, a door being slammed. But, nothing.

Finally, Drew whispered, “We have to make a move.”

Kiera was petrified and couldn’t respond.

He said, “I’ll go check on Mom. You stay here with the door locked. Got it?”

“Don’t go.”

“I have to go. Something happened to Mom, otherwise she’d be up here. I’m sure she’s hurt. Stay put and keep the door locked.”

He moved the metal shaft and silently opened her door. He peeked down the stairs and saw nothing but darkness and the faint glow of a porch light. Kiera watched and closed the door behind him. He took the first step down as he clutched the can of pepper spray and thought how great it would be to blast that son of a bitch in the face with a cloud of poison, burn his eyes and maybe blind him. Slowly, one step at a time without making a sound. In the den he stopped dead still and listened. There was a distant sound from Stu’s bedroom down the short hallway. Drew waited a moment longer and hoped that maybe Stu had put Josie to bed after slapping her around. The light was on in the kitchen. He peeked around the door face and saw her bare feet lying still, then her legs. He dropped to his knees and scurried under the table to her side where he shook her arm roughly, but didn’t speak. Any sound might attract him. He noticed her breasts but was too frightened to be embarrassed. He shook again, hissed, “Mom, Mom, wake up!” But there was no response. The left side of her face was red and swollen, and he was certain she wasn’t breathing. He wiped his eyes and backed away, and crawled into the hallway. At the end of it Stu’s bedroom door was open, a dim table light was on, and after he focused Drew could see a pair of boots hanging off the bed. Stu’s snakeskin pointed-toes, his favorites. Drew stood and walked quickly to the bedroom, and there, sprawled across the bed with his arms thrown open wide above his head and still fully dressed, was Stuart Kofer, passed out again. As Drew glared at him with unbridled hatred, the man actually snored.

Drew ran up the stairs, and as Kiera opened the door, he cried, “She’s dead, Kiera, Mom’s dead. Stu’s killed her. She’s on the kitchen floor and she’s dead.”

Kiera recoiled and shrieked and grabbed her brother. Both were in tears as they went down the stairs and to the kitchen where they cradled their mother’s head. Kiera was weeping and whispering, “Wake up, Mom! Please wake up!”

Drew delicately grabbed his mother’s left wrist and tried to check her pulse, though he wasn’t sure he was doing it properly. He felt nothing.

He said, "We gotta call 911."

"Where is he?" she asked, glancing around.

"In the bed, asleep. I think he passed out."

"I'm holding Mom. You go call."

Drew went to the den, turned on a light, picked up the phone, and dialed 911. After many rings the dispatcher finally said, "911. What's your emergency?"

"My mother has been killed by Stuart Kofer. She's dead."

"Son, who is this?"

"I'm Drew Gamble. My mother is Josie. She's dead."

"And where do you live?"

"Stuart Kofer's house, out on Bart Road. Fourteen-fourteen Bart Road. Please send someone to help us."

"I will, I will. They're on the way. And you say she's dead. How do you know she's dead?"

"'Cause she ain't breathing. 'Cause Stuart beat her again, same as always."

"Is Stuart Kofer in the house?"

"Yep, it's his house and we just live here. He came in drunk again and beat my mother. He killed her. We heard him do it."

"Where is he?"

"On his bed. Passed out. Please hurry."

"You stay on the line, okay?"

"No. I'm checkin' on my mom."

He hung up and grabbed a quilt from the sofa. Kiera had Josie's face cradled in her lap, gently rubbing her hair as she wept and kept saying, "Come on, Mom, please wake up. Please wake up. Don't leave us, Mom." Drew covered his mother with the quilt, then sat by her feet. He closed his eyes and pinched his nose and tried to pray. The house was still, silent; the only sounds were Kiera's whimpering as she begged her mother. Minutes passed and Drew willed himself to stop crying and do something to protect them. Stuart might be asleep back there but he might wake up, too, and if he caught them downstairs he would fly into a rage and beat them.

He had done that before: get drunk, rage, threaten, slap, pass out, then wake up ready for another round of fun.

Then he snorted and made a drunken noise, and Drew was afraid he might wake himself from his drunkenness. Drew said, "Kiera, be quiet," but she did not hear him. She was in a trance, pawing at her mother as tears dripped from her cheeks.

Slowly, Drew crawled away and left the kitchen. In the hall he crouched and tiptoed back to the bedroom where Stuart hadn't moved. His boots still hung off the bed. His stocky body was spread across the covers. His mouth was open wide enough to catch flies. Drew stared at him with a hatred that almost blinded him. The brute had finally killed their mother, after months of trying, and he would certainly kill them next. And no one would bother Stuart for it because he had connections and knew important people, something he often bragged about. They were nothing but white trash, castaways from the trailer parks, but Stuart had clout because he owned land and carried a badge.

Drew took a step back and looked down the hall where he saw his mother lying on the floor and his sister holding her head and moaning in a low pained hum, completely detached, and he walked to a corner of the bedroom, to a small table on Stuart's side of the bed where he kept his pistol and his thick black belt and holster and his badge in the shape of a star. He took the gun out of the holster and remembered how heavy it was. The pistol, a Glock nine-millimeter, was used by all deputies on the force. It was against the rules for a civilian to handle it. Stu cared little for silly rules, and one day not long ago when he was sober and in a rare good mood he walked Drew to the back pasture and showed him how to handle and fire the weapon. Stu had been raised with guns; Drew had not, and Stu poked fun at the kid for his ignorance. He boasted of killing his first deer when he was eight years old.

Drew had fired the gun three times, badly missing an archery target, and was frightened by the kick and noise of the gun. Stu had laughed at him for his timidity, then fired six quick rounds into the bull's-eye.

Drew held the gun with his right hand and examined it. He knew it was loaded because Stu's guns were always at the ready. There was a cabinet in the closet packed with rifles and shotguns, all loaded.

In the distance Kiera was moaning and crying, and before him Stu was snoring, and soon the police would come barging in and they would

eventually do as little as they had done before. Nothing. Nothing to protect Drew and Kiera, not even now with their mother lying dead on the kitchen floor. Stuart Kofer had killed her, and he would tell lies and the police would believe him. Then Drew and his sister would face an even darker future without their mother.

He left the room holding the Glock and slowly walked to the kitchen, where nothing had changed. He asked Kiera if their mother was breathing and she did not respond, did not interrupt her noises. He walked to the den and looked out the window into the darkness. If he had a father he didn't know him, and once again he asked himself where was the man of the family? Where was the leader, the wise one who gave advice and protection? He and Kiera had never known the security of two stable parents. They had met other fathers in foster care, and they had met youth court advocates who had tried to help, but they had never known the warm embrace of a man they could trust.

The responsibilities were left to him, the oldest. With their mother gone, he had no choice but to step up and become a man. He and he alone had to save them from a prolonged nightmare.

A noise startled him. There was a groan or a snort or some such noise from the bedroom and the box spring and mattress rattled and heaved, as if Stu was moving and coming back to life.

Drew and Kiera could not take any more. The moment had come, their only chance to survive was at hand, and Drew had to act. He returned to the bedroom and stared at Stu, still on his back and dead to the world, but oddly one boot was off and on the floor. Dead was what he deserved. Drew slowly closed the door, as if to protect Kiera from any involvement. How easy would it be? Drew clasped the pistol with both hands. He held his breath and lowered the gun until the tip of the barrel was an inch from Stu's left temple.

He closed his eyes and pulled the trigger.

2

Kiera never looked up. She stroked her mother's hair and asked, "What did you do?"

"I shot him," Drew said matter-of-factly. His voice had no expression, no fear or regret. "I shot him."

She nodded and said nothing else. He went to the den and looked out the front window again. Where were the red and blue lights? Where were the responders? You call and report your mother has been killed by a brute and no one shows up. He turned on a lamp and glanced at the clock. 2:47. He would always remember the exact moment he shot Stuart Kofer. His hands were shaking and numb, his ears were ringing, but at 2:47 a.m. he had no regrets for killing the man who'd killed his mother. He walked back to the bedroom and turned on the ceiling light. The gun was beside Stu's head, which had a small, ugly hole in the left side. Stu was still looking at the ceiling, now with his eyes open. A circle of bright red blood was spreading in an arc through the sheets.

Drew walked back to the kitchen, where nothing had changed. He went to the den, turned on another light, opened the front door, and took a seat in Stu's recliner. Stu would have a fit if he caught anyone else sitting on his throne. It smelled like him—stale cigarettes, dried sweat, old leather, whiskey and beer. After a few minutes, Drew decided he hated the recliner, so he pulled a small chair to the window to wait for the lights.

The first were blue, blinking and swirling furiously, and when they topped the driveway's last incline Drew was stricken with fear and had trouble breathing. They were coming to get him. He would leave in handcuffs in the rear seat of a deputy's patrol car, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

The second responder was an ambulance with red lights, the third was another police car. Once it was known that there were two bodies

and not just one, another ambulance arrived in a rush, followed by more law enforcement.

Josie had a pulse and was quickly loaded onto a stretcher and raced away to the hospital. Drew and Kiera were sequestered in the den and told not to move. And where would they go? Every light in the house was on and there were cops in every room.

Sheriff Ozzie Walls arrived by himself and was met in front of the house by Moss Junior Tatum, his chief deputy, who said, “Looks like Kofer came home late, they had a fight, he slapped her around, then passed out on his bed. The kid got his gun and shot him once in the head. Instant.”

“You talked to the kid?”

“Yep. Drew Gamble, age sixteen, son of Kofer’s girlfriend. Wouldn’t say much. I think he’s in shock. His sister is Kiera, age fourteen, she said they’ve lived here about a year and that Kofer was abusive, beat their mom all the time.”

“Kofer’s dead?” Ozzie asked in disbelief.

“Stuart Kofer is dead, sir.”

Ozzie shook his head in disgust and disbelief and walked to the front door, which was wide open. Inside, he stopped and glanced at Drew and Kiera who were sitting beside each other on the sofa, both staring down and trying to ignore the chaos. Ozzie wanted to say something but let it pass. He followed Tatum into the bedroom, where nothing had been touched. The gun was on the sheets, ten inches from Kofer’s head, and there was a wide circle of blood in the center of the bed. On the other side, the bullet’s exit had blown out a section of the skull, and blood and matter had been sprayed against the sheets, pillows, headboard, and wall.

At the moment, Ozzie had fourteen full-time deputies. Now thirteen. And seven part-timers, along with more volunteers than he cared to fool with. He’d been the sheriff of Ford County since 1983, elected seven years earlier in an historic landslide. Historic because he was, at the time, the only black sheriff in Mississippi and the first ever from a predominantly white county. In seven years he’d never lost a man. DeWayne Looney had his leg blown off in the courthouse shooting that put Carl Lee Hailey on trial in 1985, but Looney was still on the force.

But there, in all its ghastliness, was his first. There was Stuart Kofer, one of his best and certainly his most fearless, dead as a doornail as his

body continued to leak fluids.

Ozzie removed his hat, said a quick prayer, and took a step back. Without taking his eyes off Kofer, he said, “Murder of a law enforcement officer. Call in the state boys and let them investigate. Don’t touch anything.” He looked at Tatum and asked, “You talked to the kids?”

“I did.”

“Same story?”

“Yes sir. The boy won’t talk. His sister says he shot him. Thought their mother was dead.”

Ozzie nodded and thought about the situation. He said, “All right, no more questions for the kids, no more interrogation. From this point on, everything we do will be picked through by the lawyers. Let’s take the kids in, but not a word. In fact, put ’em in my car.”

“Handcuffs?”

“Sure. For the boy. Do they have any family around here?”

Deputy Mick Swayze cleared his throat and said, “I don’t think so, Ozzie. I knew Kofer pretty well and he had this gal livin’ with him, said she had a rough background. One divorce, maybe two. I’m not sure where she’s from but he did say she ain’t from around here. I came out here a few weeks ago on a disturbance call, but she didn’t press charges.”

“All right. We’ll figure it out. I’ll take the kids in. Moss, you ride with me. Mick, you stay here.”

Drew stood when asked and offered his hands. Tatum gently cuffed them in the front and led the suspect out of the house and to the sheriff’s car. Kiera followed, wiping tears. The hillside was manic with a thousand flashing lights. Word was out that an officer was down, and every off-duty cop in the county wanted a look.

—

OZZIE DODGED THE other patrol cars and ambulances and weaved down the drive to the county road. He turned his blue lights on and hit the gas.

Drew asked, “Sir, can we see our mother?”

Ozzie looked at Tatum and said, “Turn on your tape recorder.”

Tatum removed a small recorder from a pocket and flipped a switch.

Ozzie said, “Okay, we are now recording anything that’s said. This is Sheriff Ozzie Walls and today is March twenty-fifth, nineteen ninety, at three fifty-one in the morning, and I’m driving to the Ford County jail with Deputy Moss Junior Tatum in the front seat, and in the backseat we have, what’s your full name, son?”

“Drew Allen Gamble.”

“Age?”

“Sixteen.”

“And your name, Miss?”

“Kiera Gale Gamble, age fourteen.”

“And your mother’s name?”

“Josie Gamble. She’s thirty-two.”

“Okay. I advise you not to talk about what happened tonight. Wait until you have a lawyer. Understand?”

“Yes sir.”

“Now, you asked about your mother, right?”

“Yes sir. Is she alive?”

Ozzie glanced at Tatum, who shrugged and said into the recorder, “As far as we know, Josie Gamble is alive. She was taken from the scene in an ambulance and is probably already at the hospital.”

“Can we go see her?” Drew asked.

“No, not right now,” Ozzie said.

They rode in silence for a moment, then Ozzie said, in the direction of the recorder, “You were the first on the scene, right?”

Tatum said, “Yes.”

“And did you ask these two kids what happened?”

“I did. The boy, Drew, said nothing. I asked his sister, Kiera, if she knew anything, and she said her brother shot Kofer. At that point I stopped askin’ questions. It was pretty clear what happened.”

The radio was squawking and all of Ford County, even in the darkness, seemed to be alive. Ozzie turned down the volume and went silent himself. He kept his foot on the gas and his big brown Ford roared down the county road, straddling the center line, daring any varmint to venture onto the pavement.

He had hired Stuart Kofer four years earlier, after Kofer returned to Ford County from an abbreviated career in the army. Stuart had managed a passable job in explaining his dishonorable discharge, said it was all about technicalities and misunderstandings and so on. Ozzie gave him a uniform, put him on probation for six months, and sent him to the academy in Jackson where he excelled. On duty, there were no complaints. Kofer had become an instant legend when he single-handedly took out three drug dealers from Memphis who had gotten lost in rural Ford County.

Off-duty was another matter. Ozzie had dressed him down at least twice after reports of drinking and hell-raising, and Stuart, typically, apologized in tears, promised to clean up his act, and swore allegiance to Ozzie and the department. And he was fiercely loyal.

Ozzie had no patience with unpleasant officers and the jerks didn't last long. Kofer was one of the more popular deputies and liked to volunteer in schools and with civic clubs. Because of the army he had seen the world, an oddity among his rather rustic colleagues, most of whom had hardly stepped outside the state. In public he was an asset, a gregarious officer who always had a smile and a joke, who remembered everyone's name, who liked to walk through Lowtown, the colored section, on foot and without a gun and with candy for the kids.

In private there were problems, but as brothers in uniform his colleagues tried to keep them from Ozzie. Tatum and Swayze and most of the deputies knew something of Stuart's dark side, but it was easier to ignore it and hope for the best, hope no one got hurt.

Ozzie glanced in the mirror again and looked at Drew in the shadows. Head down, eyes closed, not a sound. And although Ozzie was stunned and angry, it was difficult to picture the kid as a murderer. Slight, shorter than his sister, pale, timid, obviously overwhelmed, the kid could pass for a shy twelve-year-old.

They roared into the dark streets of Clanton and soon slid to a stop in front of the jail, two blocks off the square. Outside the main door to the jail a deputy was standing with a man holding a camera.

"Dammit," Ozzie said. "That's Dumas Lee, isn't it?"

"Afraid so," Tatum said. "I guess word's out. They all have police scanners these days."

“Y’all stay in the car.” Ozzie got out, slammed his door, and walked straight for the reporter, already shaking his head. “You ain’t gettin’ nothin’, Dumas,” he said roughly. “There’s a minor involved and you ain’t gettin’ his name or his picture. Get outta here.”

Dumas Lee was one of two beat reporters for *The Ford County Times*, and he knew Ozzie well. “Can you confirm an officer has been killed?”

“I ain’t confirmin’ nothin’. You got ten seconds to get outta here before I slap cuffs on you and haul your ass inside. Beat it!”

The reporter slinked away and soon disappeared into the darkness. Ozzie watched him, then he and Tatum unloaded the kids and hustled them inside.

“You want to process them?” asked the jailer.

“No, we’ll do it later. Let’s just get ’em in the juvenile cell.”

With Tatum bringing up the rear, Drew and Kiera were led through a wall of bars and down a narrow hallway to a thick metal door with a narrow window. The jailer opened it and they stepped into the empty room. There were two sets of bunk beds and a dirty commode in one corner.

Ozzie said, “Take off the handcuffs.” Tatum snapped them off and Drew immediately rubbed his wrists. “You’re gonna stay here for a few hours,” Ozzie said.

“I want to see my mother,” Drew said, more forcefully than Ozzie expected.

“Son, you’re in no position to want anything right now. You’re under arrest for the murder of a law enforcement official.”

“He killed my mother.”

“Your mother is not dead, thankfully. I’m about to drive to the hospital and check on her. When I come back I’ll tell you what I know. That’s the best I can do.”

Kiera asked, “Why am I in jail? I didn’t do anything.”

“I know. You’re in jail for your own safety, and you won’t be here long. If we released you in a few hours, where would you go?”

Kiera looked at Drew and it was obvious they had no idea.

Ozzie asked, “Do y’all have any kinfolks around here? Aunts, uncles, grandparents? Anybody?”

Both hesitated then slowly shook their heads, no.

“Okay. It’s Kiera, right?”

“Yes sir.”

“If you had to call someone right now to come get you, who would you call?”

She looked at her feet and shook her head. “Our preacher, Brother Charles.”

“Charles who?”

“Charles McGarry, out in Pine Grove.”

Ozzie thought he knew all the preachers but perhaps he had missed one. In all fairness, there were three hundred churches in the county. Most were small congregations scattered throughout the countryside and notorious for fighting and splitting and running off their preachers. It was impossible for anyone to keep score. He looked at Tatum and said, “Don’t know him.”

“I do. Good guy.”

“Give him a call, wake him up, ask him to get down here.” He looked at the kids and said, “We’ll leave you here where you’re safe. They’ll bring in some snacks and drinks. Make yourself at home. I’m goin’ to the hospital.” He took a breath and looked at them with as little sympathy as possible. His overwhelming concern was a dead deputy and he was looking at the killer. Still, they were so lost and pathetic it was difficult to want revenge.

Kiera lifted her wet eyes and asked, “Sir, is he really dead?”

“He is indeed.”

“I’m sorry, but he beat our mother a lot, and he came after us too.”

Ozzie held up both hands and said, “Let’s not go any further. We’ll get a lawyer in here to talk to you kids and you can tell him anything you want. For now, just keep it quiet.”

“Yes sir.”

Ozzie and Tatum left the cell and slammed the door behind them. At the front, the jailer hung up his phone and said, “Sheriff, that was Earl Kofer, said he just heard that his son Stuart had been killed. Really upset. I said I didn’t know but you need to call him.”

Ozzie cursed under his breath and mumbled, “Just fixin’ to do that. But I need to get to the hospital. You can handle it, can’t you?”

“No,” Tatum said.

“Sure you can. Give him a few facts and tell him I’ll call later.”

“Thanks for nothin’.”

“You got it.” Ozzie hustled out the front door and drove away.

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IT WAS ALMOST 5:00 a.m. when Ozzie wheeled into the hospital’s empty lot. He parked near the ER, hurried inside, and almost bumped into Dumas Lee, who was one step ahead of him.

“No comment, Dumas, and you’re pissin’ me off.”

“That’s my job, Sheriff. Just searching for the truth.”

“I don’t know the truth.”

“Is the woman dead?”

“I’m not a doctor. Now leave me alone.”

Ozzie punched the elevator button and left the reporter in the lobby. On the third floor, two deputies were waiting, and they escorted their boss to a desk where a young doctor saw them coming and was waiting. Ozzie made introductions and everybody nodded without shaking hands. “What can you tell us?” he asked.

Without looking at a chart, the doctor said, “She’s unconscious but stable. Her left jaw is shattered and will need surgery soon to reset it, but it’s not that urgent. Looks like she just took a shot to the jaw and/or chin and got knocked out.”

“Any other injuries?”

“Not really, maybe some bruises on her wrists and neck, nothing that requires care.”

Ozzie took a deep breath and thanked God for only one murder at a time. “So she’ll pull through?”

“Her vitals are strong. Right now there’s no reason to expect anything but a recovery.”

“So when might she wake up?”

“Hard to predict, but I’d guess within forty-eight hours.”

“Okay. Look, I’m sure you’ll keep good records and all, but just remember that everything you do with this patient will probably be

picked over in a courtroom one day. Keep that in mind. Be sure to take plenty of X-rays and color photos.”

“Yes sir.”

“I’ll leave an officer here to monitor things.”

Ozzie marched away and returned to the elevator and left the hospital. As he drove back to the jail, he grabbed his radio and called Tatum. The conversation with Earl Kofer had been about as awful as one could expect.

“You’d better call him, Ozzie. He said he’s goin’ over there to see for himself.”

“Okay.” Ozzie ended the call as he stopped in front of the jail. He held his phone and stared at it and, as always at these terrible moments, remembered the other late night and early morning calls to families; terrible calls that would dramatically change and even ruin the lives of many; calls he hated to make but his job required it. A young father found with his face blown off and a suicide note nearby; two drunk teenagers hurled from a speeding car; a demented grandfather finally found in a ditch. It was by far the worst part of his life.

Earl Kofer was hysterical and wanted to know who killed his “boy.” Ozzie was patient and said he couldn’t talk about the details at the moment but was willing to meet with the family, another dreadful prospect that was unavoidable. No, Earl should not go to Stuart’s house because he would not be allowed in. The deputies there were waiting for investigators from the state crime lab, and their work would take hours. Ozzie suggested that the family meet at Earl’s house and he, Ozzie, would stop by later in the morning. The father was wailing into the phone when Ozzie finally managed to hang up.

Inside the jail, he asked Tatum if Deputy Marshall Prather had been notified. Tatum said yes, he was on his way. Prather was a veteran who had been a close friend of Stuart Kofer’s since they were kids at Clanton Elementary School. He arrived in jeans and a sweatshirt and a state of disbelief. He followed Ozzie to his office where they fell into chairs as Tatum closed the door. Ozzie recited the facts as they knew them, and Prather couldn’t hide his emotions. He gritted his teeth like a tough guy and covered his eyes, but he was obviously suffering.

After a long, painful pause, Prather managed to say, “We started school together in the third grade.” His voice faded and he lowered his

chin. Ozzie looked at Tatum, who looked away.

After another long pause, Ozzie pressed on. “What do you know about this woman, Josie Gamble?”

Prather swallowed hard and shook his head as if he could shake off the emotion. “I met her once or twice but didn’t really know her. Stu took up with her I’d guess about a year ago. She and her kids moved in. She seemed nice enough, but she’d been around the block a few times. Pretty rough background.”

“What do you mean?”

“She served some time. Drugs, I think. Has a colorful past. Stu met her in a bar, no surprise, and they hit it off. He didn’t like the idea of her two kids hangin’ around, but she talked him into it. Lookin’ back, she needed a place to stay and he had extra bedrooms.”

“What was the attraction?”

“Come on, Ozzie. Not a bad-lookin’ woman, pretty damned cute really, looks good in tight jeans. You know Stu, always on the prowl but completely unable to get along with a woman.”

“And the drinkin’?”

Prather removed an old cap and scratched his hair.

Ozzie leaned forward with a scowl and said, “I’m askin’ questions, Marshall, and I want answers. This is no time for a cop cover-up where you look the other way and play dumb. I want answers.”

“I don’t know much, Ozzie, I swear. I stopped drinkin’ three years ago so I don’t hang out in the bars anymore. Yes, Stu was drinkin’ too much and I think it was gettin’ worse. I talked to him about it, twice. He said everything was fine, same as all drunks. I gotta cousin who still hits the joints and he told me that Stu was gettin’ quite the reputation as a brawler, which was not what I wanted to hear. Said he was gamblin’ a lot over at Huey’s, down by the lake.”

“And you didn’t think I should know this?”

“Come on, Ozzie, I was concerned. That’s why I had a chat with Stu. I was gonna talk to him again, I swear.”

“Don’t swear to me. So we had a deputy drinkin’, fightin’, and gamblin’ with the riffraff, and oh by the way beatin’ his girlfriend at home, and you thought I shouldn’t know about it, right?”

“I thought you knew.”

“We did,” Tatum interrupted.

“Say what?” Ozzie snapped. “I never heard a word about domestic abuse.”

“There was a report filed a month ago. She called 911 late one night and said Stu was on a rampage. We sent a car out with Pirtle and McCarver and they settled things down. The woman had obviously been slapped around but she refused to press charges.”

Ozzie was livid. “I never heard about this and never saw the paperwork. What happened to it?”

Tatum shot a look at Prather, but it was not returned. Tatum shrugged as if he knew nothing and said, “There was no arrest, just an incident report. Must’ve been misplaced, I guess. I don’t know, Ozzie, I wasn’t involved.”

“I’m sure no one was involved. If I looked high and low and grilled every man in my department I’m sure I wouldn’t find anyone who was involved.”

Prather glared at him and asked, “So you’re blamin’ Stu for gettin’ himself shot, is that right, Ozzie? Blame the victim?”

Ozzie sank in his chair and closed his eyes.

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ON THE BOTTOM bunk, Drew had curled up with his knees to his chest and was resting under a thin blanket with his head on an old pillow. He stared blankly at the dark wall. It had been hours since he said anything. Kiera sat at the foot of the bed, one hand touching his feet under the blanket and the other hand twirling her long hair as they waited for whatever might happen next. From time to time there were voices in the hallway but they faded, then disappeared for good.

For the first hour she and Drew had talked about the obvious—their mother’s condition, and the stunning news that she was not dead, and then the shooting of Stu. The fact that he was dead was a relief to both of them and they felt fear but no remorse. Stu had used their mother as a punching bag, but had slapped them around too, and threatened them repeatedly. That nightmare was over. They would never again hear the sickening sounds of their mother getting smacked around by a drunken thug.

The jail cell itself was insignificant. Such crude and unsanitary conditions might bother a new offender, but they had seen worse. Drew had once spent four months in a juvenile facility in another state. Just last year they had locked Kiera up for two days in what was supposed to be protective custody. Jail was survivable.

For a little family that was always on the move, one question before them was where to go next. Once they were with their mother they could plan their next move. They had met some of Stu's relatives and had always felt unwelcome. Stu liked to boast that he owned the house "free and clear" of debt because his grandfather had left it to him in a will. The house really wasn't that nice. It was dirty and needed repairs, and Josie's efforts to clean up were always met with disapproval. They had decided that they would not miss Stu's house.

During the second hour, they had speculated about how much trouble Drew might be facing. For them, it was a simple matter of self-defense, of survival, and of retribution. Slowly, Drew began to relive the shooting, step by step, or as much as he could remember. It had happened so fast and was a blur. Stu lying there, red-faced with his mouth open, snoring away as if he'd earned a good night's sleep. Stu reeking of alcohol. Violent Stu who could awaken at any moment and slap the kids around for the fun of it.

The pungent smell of spent gunpowder. The flash of blood and matter hitting the pillows and the wall. The shock of seeing Stu's eyes roll open after he was shot.

As the hours passed, though, Drew had grown quieter. He pulled the blanket to his chin and said he was tired of talking. She watched him slowly curl into himself and stare blankly at the wall.