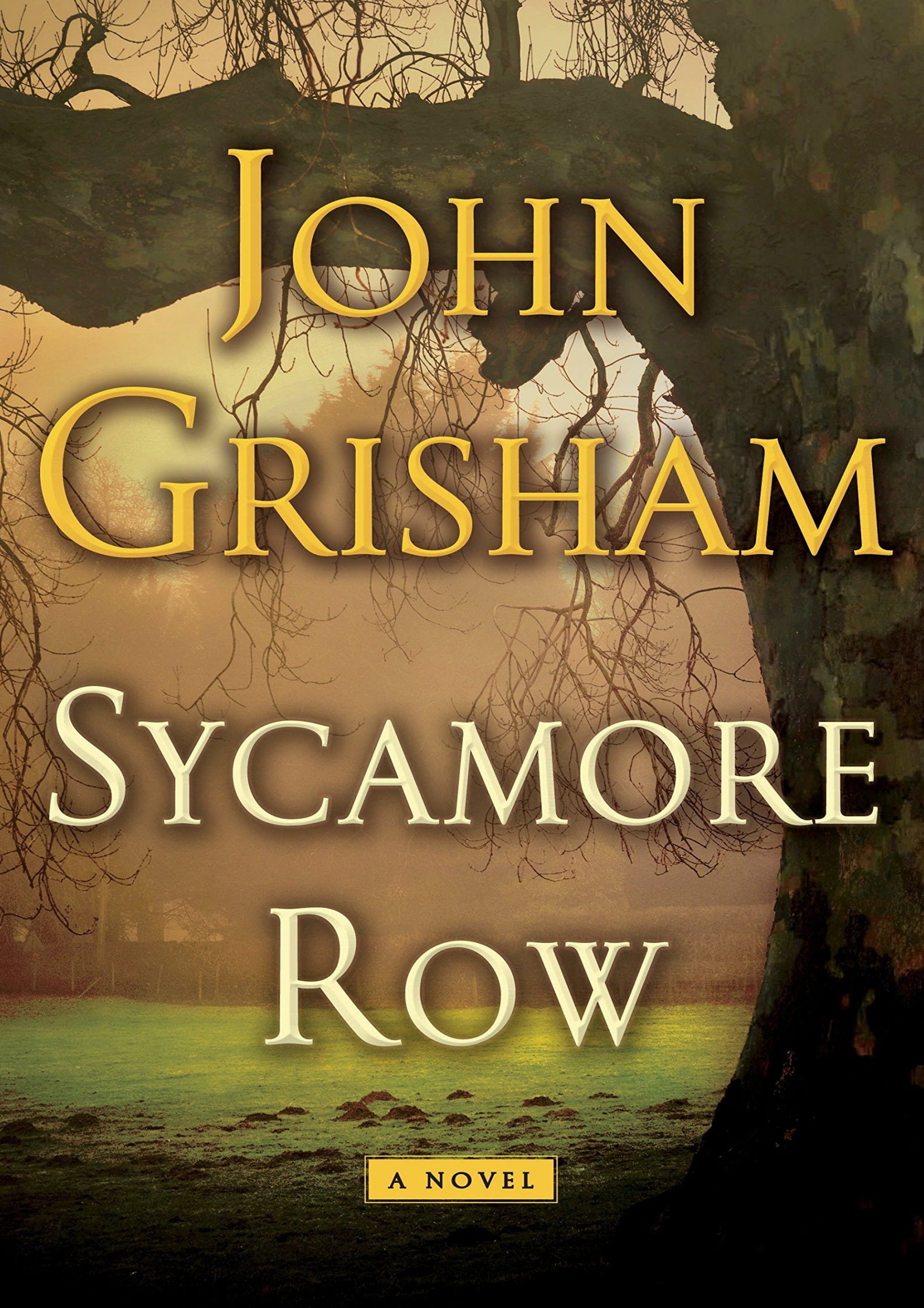
JOHN
GRISHAM
SYCAMORE
ROW
A NOVEL

JOHN GRISHAM

SYCAMORE ROW

DOUBLEDAY

New York London Toronto Sydney Auckland

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v3.1

To Renée

Contents

1

They found Seth Hubbard in the general area where he had promised to be, though not exactly in the condition expected. He was at the end of a rope, six feet off the ground and twisting slightly in the wind. A front was moving through and Seth was soaked when they found him, not that it mattered. Someone would point out that there was no mud on his shoes and no tracks below him, so therefore he was probably hanging and dead when the rain began. Why was that important? Ultimately, it was not.

The logistics of hanging oneself from a tree are not that simple. Evidently, Seth thought of everything. The rope was three-quarter-inch braided natural Manila, of some age and easily strong enough to handle Seth, who weighed 160 pounds a month earlier at the doctor's office. Later, an employee in one of Seth's factories would report that he had seen his boss cut the fifty-foot length from a spool a week before using it in such dramatic fashion. One end was tied firmly to a lower branch of the same tree and secured with a slapdash mix of knots and lashings. But, they held. The other end was looped over a higher branch, two feet in girth and exactly twenty-one feet from the ground. From there it fell about nine feet, culminating in a perfect hangman's knot, one that Seth had undoubtedly worked on for some time. The noose was straight from the textbook with thirteen coils designed to collapse the loop under pressure. A true hangman's knot snaps the neck, making death quicker and less painful, and apparently Seth had done his homework. Other than what was obvious, there was no sign of a struggle or suffering.

A six-foot stepladder had been kicked aside and was lying benignly nearby. Seth had picked his tree, flung his rope, tied it off, climbed the ladder, adjusted the noose, and, when everything was just right, kicked the ladder and fell. His hands were free and dangling near his pockets.

Had there been an instant of doubt, of second-guessing? When his feet left the safety of the ladder, but with his hands still free, had Seth instinctively grabbed the rope above his head and fought desperately

until he surrendered? No one would ever know, but it looked doubtful. Later evidence would reveal that Seth had been a man on a mission.

For the occasion, he had selected his finest suit, a thick wool blend, dark gray and usually reserved for funerals in cooler weather. He owned only three. A proper hanging has the effect of stretching the body, so Seth's trouser cuffs stopped at his ankles and his jacket stopped at his waist. His black wing tips were polished and spotless. His blue necktie was perfectly knotted. His white shirt, though, was stained with blood that had oozed from under the rope. Within hours, it would be known that Seth Hubbard had attended the 11:00 a.m. worship service at a nearby church. He had spoken to acquaintances, joked with a deacon, placed an offering in the plate, and seemed in reasonably good spirits. Most folks knew Seth was battling lung cancer, though virtually no one knew the doctors had given him a short time to live. Seth was on several prayer lists at the church. However, he carried the stigma of two divorces and would always be tainted as a true Christian.

His suicide would not help matters.

The tree was an ancient sycamore Seth and his family had owned for many years. The land around it was thick with hardwoods, valuable timber Seth had mortgaged repeatedly and parlayed into wealth. His father had acquired the land by dubious means back in the 1930s. Both of Seth's ex-wives had tried valiantly to take the land in the divorce wars, but he held on. They got virtually everything else.

First on the scene was Calvin Boggs, a handyman and farm laborer Seth had employed for several years. Early Sunday morning, Calvin had received a call from his boss. "Meet me at the bridge at 2:00 p.m.," Seth said. He didn't explain anything and Calvin was not one to ask questions. If Mr. Hubbard said to meet him somewhere at a certain time, then he would be there. At the last minute, Calvin's ten-year-old boy begged to tag along, and, against his instincts, Calvin said yes. They followed a gravel road that zigzagged for miles through the Hubbard property. As Calvin drove, he was certainly curious about the meeting. He could not remember another occasion when he met his boss anywhere on a Sunday afternoon. He knew his boss was ill and there were rumors he was dying, but, like everything else, Mr. Hubbard kept it quiet.

The bridge was nothing more than a wooden platform spanning a nameless, narrow creek choked with kudzu and crawling with cottonmouths. For months, Mr. Hubbard had been planning to replace it

with a large concrete culvert, but his bad health had sidetracked him. It was near a clearing where two dilapidated shacks rotted in the brush and overgrowth and offered the only hint that there was once a small settlement there.

Parked near the bridge was Mr. Hubbard's late-model Cadillac, its driver's door open, along with the trunk. Calvin rolled to a stop behind the car and stared at the open trunk and door and felt the first hint that something might be out of place. The rain was steady now and the wind had picked up, and there was no good reason for Mr. Hubbard to leave his door and trunk open. Calvin told his boy to stay in the truck, then slowly walked around the car without touching it. There was no sign of his boss. Calvin took a deep breath, wiped moisture from his face, and looked at the landscape. Beyond the clearing, maybe a hundred yards away, he saw a body hanging from a tree. He returned to his truck, again told the boy to stay inside and keep the doors locked, but it was too late. The boy was staring at the sycamore in the distance.

"Stay here now," Calvin said sternly. "And don't get out of the truck."

"Yes sir."

Calvin began walking. He took his time as his boots slipped in the mud and his mind tried to stay calm. What was the hurry? The closer he got the clearer things became. The man in the dark suit at the end of the rope was quite dead. Calvin finally recognized him, and he saw the stepladder, and he quickly put the scene and the events in order. Touching nothing, he backed away and returned to his truck.

It was October of 1988, and car phones had finally arrived in rural Mississippi. At Mr. Hubbard's insistence, Calvin had one installed in his truck. He called the Ford County sheriff's office, gave a brief report, and began waiting. Warmed by the heater and soothed by Merle Haggard on the radio, Calvin gazed through the windshield, ignored the boy, tapped his fingers along with the wipers, and realized he was crying. The boy was afraid to speak.

Two deputies arrived in the same car half an hour later, and as they were putting on rain slickers an ambulance arrived with a crew of three. From the gravel road, they all strained to see the old sycamore, but after a few seconds of focusing it was apparent there was a man hanging from it. Calvin told them everything he knew. The deputies decided it was best to proceed as if a crime had been committed, and they prohibited the ambulance crew from approaching the scene. Another deputy arrived,

then another. They searched the car and found nothing helpful. They photographed and videoed Seth hanging with his eyes closed and his head twisted grotesquely to his right. They studied the tracks around the sycamore and found no evidence of anyone else being present. One deputy took Calvin to Mr. Hubbard's home a few miles away—the boy rode in the backseat, still mute. The doors were unlocked, and on the kitchen table they found a note on a yellow legal pad. Seth had printed neatly: "To Calvin. Please inform the authorities I've taken my own life, with no help from anyone. On the attached sheet of paper I have left specific instructions for my funeral and burial. No autopsy! S.H." It was dated that day, Sunday, October 2, 1988.

Calvin was finally released by the deputies. He hustled the boy home, where he collapsed in his mother's arms and said nothing the rest of the day.

Ozzie Walls was one of two black sheriffs in Mississippi. The other had just recently been elected from a county in the Delta that was 70 percent black. Ford County was 74 percent white, but Ozzie had won his election and reelection by wide margins. The blacks adored him because he was one of their own. The whites respected him because he was a tough cop and a former football star at Clanton High. In some aspects of life in the Deep South, football was slowly transcending race.

Ozzie was leaving church with his wife and four kids when he got the call. He arrived at the bridge in a suit, no gun or badge, but he did have a pair of old boots in the trunk. Escorted by two of his deputies, he made the walk down to the sycamore in the mud and under an umbrella. Seth's body was by now soaked and water dripped from the tips of his shoes, his chin, ears, fingertips, and the cuffs of his pants. Ozzie stopped not far from the shoes, raised his umbrella, and looked at the pallid, pathetic face of a man he'd met only twice.

There was a history. In 1983, when Ozzie first ran for sheriff, he had three white opponents and no money. He received a call from Seth Hubbard, a stranger to him, and, as Ozzie would learn, a man who kept a low profile. Seth lived in the northeast corner of Ford County, almost on the line with Tyler County. He said he was in the lumber and timber business, owned some sawmills in Alabama, a factory here and there, and gave the appearance of a man who was successful. He offered to

bankroll Ozzie's campaign, but only if he would accept cash. Twenty-five thousand dollars in cash. In his office, behind a locked door, Seth Hubbard opened a box and showed Ozzie the money. Ozzie explained that campaign contributions must be reported and so on. Seth explained that he did not want his particular contribution to be reported. He wanted a cash deal, or no deal.

"What do you want in return?" Ozzie had asked.

"I want you to be elected. Nothing more," Seth had replied.

"I'm not so sure about this."

"Do you think your opponents are taking cash under the table?"

"Probably."

"Of course they are. Don't be foolish."

Ozzie took the money. He ramped up his campaign, squeaked into the runoff, then stomped his opponent in the general election. Later, he had stopped by Seth's office on two occasions to say hello and thanks, but Mr. Hubbard was never there. Mr. Hubbard did not return phone calls. Ozzie quietly quizzed others for information about Mr. Hubbard but little was known. He was rumored to have made money in furniture, but no one knew for sure. He owned two hundred acres of land near his home. He did not use local banks or law firms or insurance agencies. He went to church occasionally.

Four years later Ozzie faced light opposition, but Seth wanted to meet anyway. Twenty-five thousand dollars changed hands again, and again Seth disappeared from view. Now he was dead, killed by his own noose and dripping with rainwater.

Finn Plunkett, the county coroner, finally arrived. The death could now be made official.

"Let's get him down," Ozzie said. The knots were untied, and with slack in the rope Seth's body made its descent. They placed him on a stretcher and covered him with a thermal sheet. Four men labored under the strain as they made their way to the ambulance. Ozzie followed the little procession, as confused as anyone.

He was well into his fifth year on the job and he had seen so many dead bodies. Accidents, car wrecks, a few murders, some suicides. He wasn't callous and he wasn't jaded. He had made the late-night phone calls to parents and spouses, and he always feared the next one.

Good old Seth. Who, exactly, was Ozzie supposed to call now? He knew Seth was divorced but did not know if he had remarried. He knew

nothing about his family. Seth was about seventy. If he had adult children, where were they?

Oh well, Ozzie would find out soon enough. Driving toward Clanton, with the ambulance behind him, he began calling people who might know something about Seth Hubbard.

2

Jake Brigance stared at the bright red numbers of his digital alarm clock. At 5:29 he reached over, pushed a button, and gently swung his feet out of bed. Carla flipped from one side to the other and burrowed deeper under the covers. Jake patted her rear end and said good morning. There was no response. It was Monday, a workday, and she would sleep for another hour before scurrying from bed and hustling off to school with Hanna. In the summer, Carla would sleep even later and her days were filled with girl stuff and whatever Hanna wanted to do. Jake, though, had a schedule that rarely varied. Up at 5:30; at the Coffee Shop by 6:00; at the office before 7:00. Few people attacked the morning like Jake Brigance, though, now that he had reached the mature age of thirty-five, he asked himself more often why, exactly, did he awaken so early? And why did he insist on arriving at his office before all other lawyers in Clanton? The answers, once so clear, were becoming more obscure. His dream since law school of being a great trial lawyer was not diminished at all; indeed, he was as ambitious as ever. Reality was bugging him. Ten years in the trenches and his office was still filled with wills and deeds and two-bit contract disputes, not one decent criminal case and no promising car wrecks.

His most glorious moment had come and gone. The acquittal of Carl Lee Hailey was three years ago, and Jake sometimes feared he was now beyond his pinnacle. As always, though, he brushed those doubts aside and reminded himself that he was only thirty-five. He was a gladiator with many great courtroom victories before him.

There was no dog to turn out because they'd lost their dog. Max died in the fire that destroyed their beautiful and beloved and heavily mortgaged Victorian home on Adams Street, three years ago. The Klan had torched the house in the heat of the Hailey trial, July 1985. First they burned a cross in the front yard, then they tried to blow up the house. Jake sent Carla and Hanna away and it was a wise thing to do. After the

Klan tried to kill him for a month, they finally burned down his house. He had given his closing argument in a borrowed suit.

The topic of a new dog was too uncomfortable to fully address. They had danced around it a few times, then moved on. Hanna wanted one and probably needed one because she was an only child and often claimed to be bored playing alone. But Jake, and especially Carla, knew who would assume the responsibility of housebreaking and cleaning up after a puppy. Besides, they were living in a rental home with their lives far from settled. Perhaps a dog could bring about some normalcy; perhaps not. Jake often pondered this issue in the early minutes of the day. The truth was he really missed a dog.

After a quick shower, Jake dressed in a small, spare bedroom he and Carla used as a closet to store their clothes. All rooms were small in this flimsy house owned by someone else. Everything was temporary. The furniture was a sad ensemble of giveaways and flea market leftovers, all of which would be tossed one day if things went as planned, though, Jake hated to admit, almost nothing was going his way. Their lawsuit against the insurance company was bogged down in pretrial maneuvering that seemed hopeless. He had filed it six months after the Hailey verdict, when he was on top of the world and bristling with confidence. How dare an insurance company try and screw him? Show him another jury in Ford County and he'd deliver another great verdict. But the swagger and bluster faded as Jake and Carla slowly realized they had been seriously underinsured. Four blocks away, their vacant and scarred lot was just sitting there, gathering leaves. From next door, Mrs. Pickle kept an eye on it, but there was little to watch. The neighbors were waiting for a fine new home to rise up and for the Brigances to return.

Jake tiptoed into Hanna's room, kissed her on the cheek and pulled the sheets up a bit higher. She was seven now, their only child, and there would be no others. She was in the second grade at Clanton Elementary, in a classroom around the corner from where her mother taught kindergartners.

In the narrow kitchen, Jake pushed a button on the coffee brewer and watched the machine until it began making noises. He opened his briefcase, touched the 9-millimeter semiautomatic pistol holstered inside, and stuffed in some files. He had grown accustomed to carrying a gun and this saddened him. How could he live a normal life with a weapon nearby at all times? Normal or not, the gun was a necessity. They burn

your house after they try to bomb it; they threaten your wife on the phone; they torch a cross in your front yard; they beat your secretary's husband senseless and he later dies; they use a sniper to take a shot, but he misses you and hits a guard; they wage terror during the trial and keep up their threats long after it's over.

Four of the terrorists were now serving prison sentences—three federal, one at Parchman. Only four, Jake reminded himself constantly. There should have been a dozen convictions by now, a feeling shared by Ozzie and other black leaders in the county. Out of habit and out of a sense of frustration, Jake called the FBI at least once a week for updates on their investigation. After three years, his calls were often not returned. He wrote letters. His file filled an entire cabinet in his office.

Only four. He knew the names of many others, all suspects still, in Jake's mind anyway. Some had moved and some had stayed, but they were out there, going about their lives as if nothing had happened. So he carried a gun, one with all the proper permits and such. There was one in his briefcase. One in his car. A couple around the office, and several others. His hunting rifles had gone up in the fire, but Jake was slowly rebuilding his collection.

He stepped outside, onto the small brick porch, and filled his lungs with the cool air. On the street, directly in front of the house, there was a Ford County sheriff's patrol car, and behind the wheel sat one Louis Tuck, a full-time deputy who worked the graveyard shift and whose primary responsibility was to be seen in the neighborhood throughout the night and, specifically, to be parked near the mailbox at precisely 5:45 each morning, Monday through Saturday, when Mr. Brigance stepped onto the porch and waved hello. Tuck waved back. The Brigances had survived another night.

As long as Ozzie Walls was sheriff of Ford County, which would be at least three more years and probably much longer, he and his office would do whatever possible to protect Jake and his family. Jake had taken Carl Lee Hailey's case, worked like a dog for peanuts, dodged bullets, ignored real threats, and lost almost everything before delivering a not-guilty verdict that still resonated in Ford County. Protecting him was Ozzie's highest priority.

Tuck eased away. He would circle the block and return in a few minutes after Jake left. He would watch the house until he saw lights in the kitchen and knew Carla was up and moving around.

Jake drove one of two Saabs in Ford County, a red one with 190,000 miles on it. He needed an upgrade but couldn't afford one. Such an exotic car in a small town had once been a cool idea, but now the repair costs were brutal. The nearest dealer was in Memphis, an hour away, so every trip to the shop killed half a day and cost a thousand bucks. Jake was ready for an American model, and he thought about this every morning when he turned the ignition key and held his breath as the engine rolled over and came to life. The engine had never failed to start, but in the past few weeks Jake had noticed a delay, an extra turn or two that evoked an ominous warning that something bad was about to happen. Paranoid, he was noticing other noises and rattles, and he was checking the tires every other day as the treads grew thinner. He backed onto Culbert Street, which, though only four blocks from Adams Street and their vacant lot, was clearly in a lesser part of town. The house next door was also a rental. Adams was lined with homes much older and statelier and with more character. Culbert was a hodgepodge of suburban-style boxes thrown up before the city got serious about zoning.

Though she said little, Jake knew Carla was ready to move on, to somewhere.

They had actually talked of moving away, of leaving Clanton altogether. The three years since the Hailey trial had been far less prosperous than they had hoped and expected. If Jake was destined to slog through a long career as a struggling lawyer, then why not struggle somewhere else? Carla could teach school anywhere. Surely they could find a good life that did not include weapons and constant vigilance. Jake may have been revered by the blacks in Ford County, but he was still resented by many of the whites. And the crazies were still out there. On the other hand, there was a certain safety living in the midst of so many friends. Their neighbors watched the traffic and a strange car or truck was noted. Every cop in town and every deputy in the county knew the safety of the little Brigance family was of the highest importance.

Jake and Carla would never leave, though it was sometimes amusing to play the old game of where-would-you-like-to-live? It was only a game because Jake knew the brutal truth that he would never fit in a big firm in a big city, nor would he ever find a small town in any state that was not already brimming with hungry lawyers. He was looking clearly at his future, and he was okay with it. He just needed to make a buck.

He drove past the empty lot on Adams, mumbled vile words in condemnation of the cowards who torched his home and managed a few choice ones for the insurance company as well, then sped away. From Adams he turned onto Jefferson, then Washington, which ran east and west along the north side of the Clanton square. His office was on Washington, across from the stately courthouse, and he parked in the same spot each morning at 6:00 a.m. because at that hour there were plenty to choose from. The square would be quiet for two more hours, until the courthouse and the shops and offices around it opened for business.

The Coffee Shop, though, was bustling with blue collars, farmers, and deputies when Jake strolled in and began saying good morning. As always, he was the only one wearing a coat and tie. The white collars gathered an hour later across the square at the Tea Shoppe and discussed interest rates and world politics. At the Coffee Shop they talked football, local politics, and bass fishing. Jake was one of the very few professionals tolerated inside the Coffee Shop. There were several reasons for this: he was well liked, thick-skinned, and good-natured; and, he was always available for a quick legal tip at no charge when one of the mechanics or truck drivers was in a bind. He hung his jacket on the wall and found a seat at a table with Marshall Prather, a deputy. Two days earlier, Ole Miss had lost to Georgia by three touchdowns and this was the hot topic. A gum-smacking, sassy gal named Dell poured his coffee while managing to bump him with her ample ass—the same routine six mornings a week. Within minutes she delivered food he never ordered—wheat toast, grits, and strawberry jelly, the usual. As Jake was shaking Tabasco sauce on the grits, Prather asked, “Say, Jake, did you know Seth Hubbard?”

“Never met him,” Jake said, catching a few glances. “I’ve heard his name once or twice. Had a place up near Palmyra, didn’t he?”

“That’s it.” Prather chewed on a sausage as Jake sipped his coffee.

Jake waited, then said, “I guess it’s safe to assume something bad happened to Seth Hubbard because you put him in the past tense.”

“I did what?” Prather asked. The deputy had an annoying habit of dropping a loud, loaded question over breakfast and following it up with silence. He knew the details and the dirt, and he was always fishing to see if anyone else had something to add.

“The past tense. You asked ‘Did I know him?’ not ‘Do I know him?’—which would of course indicate he’s still alive. Right?”

“I suppose.”

“So what happened?”

Andy Furr, a mechanic at the Chevrolet place, said loudly, “Killed himself yesterday. Found him hangin’ from a tree.”

“Left a note and everything,” added Dell as she swooped by with a coffeepot. The café had been open for an hour, so there was little doubt Dell knew as much about Seth Hubbard’s passing as anyone.

“Okay, what did the note say?” Jake asked calmly.

“Can’t tell you, sweetie,” she chirped. “That’s between me and Seth.”

“You didn’t know Seth,” Prather said.

Dell was an old tart with the quickest tongue in town. She said, “I loved Seth once, or maybe it was twice. Can’t always remember.”

“There have been so many,” Prather said.

“Yeah, but you’ll never get close old boy,” she said.

“You really don’t remember, do you?” Prather shot back and got a few laughs.

“Where was the note?” Jake asked, trying to reverse the conversation.

Prather stuffed a load of pancakes in his mouth, chewed for a while, then replied, “On the kitchen table. Ozzie’s got it now, still investigatin’ but not much to it. Looks like Hubbard went to church, seemed fine, then drove back onto his property, took a stepladder and a rope and did the deed. One of his workers found him around two yesterday afternoon, swingin’ in the rain. All dressed up in his Sunday best.”

Interesting, bizarre, tragic, but Jake found it difficult to have any concern for a man he’d never met. Andy Furr asked, “Did he have anything?”

“Don’t know,” Prather said. “I think Ozzie knew him but he’s not sayin’ much.”

Dell refilled their cups and stopped to talk. With a hand on one hip she said, “No, I never knew him. But my cousin knows his first wife, he had at least two, and accordin’ to the first one Seth had some land and money. She said he laid low, kept secrets, and didn’t trust anybody. Also said he was a nasty sonofabitch, but then they always say that after the divorce.”

“You oughtta know,” Prather added.

“I do know, old boy. I know so much more than you.”

“Is there a last will and testament?” Jake asked. Probate work was not his favorite, but a sizable estate usually meant a decent fee for someone in town. It was all paper shuffling with a couple of court appearances, nothing difficult and not too tedious. Jake knew that by 9:00 a.m. the lawyers in town would be slinking around trying to find out who wrote Seth Hubbard’s last will.

“Don’t know yet,” Prather said.

“Wills ain’t public record, are they Jake?” asked Bill West, an electrician at the shoe factory north of town.

“Not until you die. You can change your will at the last minute, so it would be useless to record it. Plus, you might not want the world to know what’s in your will until you’re dead. Once that happens, and once the will is probated, then it’s filed in court and becomes public.” Jake looked around as he spoke and counted at least three men he had prepared wills for. He made them short, quick, and cheap, and this was well known in town. It kept the traffic moving.

“When does probate start?” Bill West asked.

“There’s no time limit. Usually the surviving spouse or children of the deceased will find the will, take it to a lawyer, and a month or so after the funeral they’ll go to court and start the process.”

“What if there’s no will?”

“That’s a lawyer’s dream,” Jake said with a laugh. “It’s a mess. If Mr. Hubbard died with no will, and left behind a couple of ex-wives, maybe some adult children, maybe some grandchildren, who knows, then they’d probably spend the next five years fighting over his property, assuming of course he does have assets.”

“Oh, he’s got ’em,” Dell said from across the café, her radar as always on high alert. If you coughed she quizzed you about your health. If you sneezed she hustled over with a tissue. If you were uncharacteristically quiet she might pry into your home life, or your job. If you tried to whisper she would be standing at your table, refilling cups of coffee regardless of how full they happened to be. She missed nothing, remembered everything, and never failed to remind her boys of something they’d said to the contrary three years earlier.

Marshall Prather rolled his eyes at Jake, as if to say, “She’s nuts.” But he wisely said nothing. Instead, he finished off his pancakes and had to leave.

Jake was not far behind. He paid his check at 6:40 and left the Coffee Shop, hugging Dell on the way out and choking on the fumes of her cheap perfume. The sky was orange in the east as dawn unfolded. Yesterday's rain was gone and the air was clear and cool. As always, Jake headed east, away from his office, and at a brisk pace as if he were late for an important meeting. The truth was that he had no important meetings that day, just a couple of routine office visits with people in trouble.

Jake took his morning stroll around the Clanton square, passing banks and insurance agencies and realty offices, shops and cafés, all tucked neatly together, all closed at this early hour. With a few exceptions, the buildings were two-story redbrick with wrought-iron laced terraces overhanging the sidewalks that ran in a perfect square around the courthouse and its lawn. Clanton wasn't exactly prospering, but it wasn't dying either like so many small towns in the rural South. The 1980 census put the population at just over eight thousand, four times that much for the entire county, and the numbers were expected to increase slightly after the next head count. There were no empty storefronts, nothing boarded up, no "For Lease" signs hanging sadly in the windows. He was from Karaway, a small town of twenty-five hundred eighteen miles west of Clanton, and Main Street there was decaying as merchants retired, cafés closed, and the lawyers gradually packed their books and moved to the county seat. There were now twenty-six around the Clanton square, and the number was growing, the competition steadily choking itself. How many more can we stand? Jake often asked himself.

He relished walking past the other law offices and gazing at their locked doors and dark reception rooms. It was a victory lap of sorts. In his smugness he was ready to tackle the day while his competition was still asleep. He walked past the office of Harry Rex Vonner, perhaps his closest friend in the bar, and a warrior who rarely arrived before 9:00, often with a reception filled with edgy divorce clients. Harry Rex had been through several wives and knew a chaotic home life, and for this reason he preferred to work late into the night. Jake walked past the hated Sullivan firm, home of the largest collection of lawyers in the county. Nine at last count, nine complete assholes Jake tried to avoid, but this was partly out of envy. Sullivan had the banks and insurance companies and its lawyers earned more than all the rest. He walked past the troubled and padlocked office of an old pal named Mack Stafford,

unseen and unheard from now for eight months after apparently fleeing in the middle of the night with money belonging to his clients. His wife and two daughters were still waiting, as was an indictment. Secretly, Jake hoped Mack was on a beach somewhere, sipping rum drinks and never coming back. He'd been an unhappy man in an unhappy marriage. "Keep running, Mack," Jake said each morning as he touched the padlock without breaking stride.

He passed the offices of *The Ford County Times*, the Tea Shoppe, which was only now coming to life, a haberdashery where he bought his suits on sale, a black-owned café called Claude's where he ate every Friday with the other white liberals in town, an antiques store owned by a crook Jake had sued twice, a bank still holding the second mortgage on his home and tied up in the same lawsuit, and a county office building where the new district attorney worked when he was in town. The old one, Rufus Buckley, was gone, banished last year by the voters and permanently retired from elective office, or at least Jake and many others hoped so. He and Buckley had almost choked each other during the Hailey trial, and the hatred was still intense. Now the ex-DA was back in his hometown of Smithfield, in Polk County, where he was licking his wounds and scrambling to make a living on a Main Street crammed with other law offices.

The loop was over, and Jake unlocked the front door to his own office, which was generally considered to be the finest in town. The building, along with many others on the square, had been built by the Wilbanks family a hundred years earlier, and for almost that long a Wilbanks had practiced law there. The streak ended when Lucien, the last remaining Wilbanks and no doubt the craziest, had been disbarred. He had just hired Jake, fresh out of law school and full of ideals. Lucien wanted to corrupt him, but before he had the chance the State Bar Association yanked his license for the last time. With Lucien gone and no other Wilbanks around, Jake inherited a magnificent suite of offices. He used only five of the ten rooms available. There was a large reception area downstairs where the current secretary did her work and greeted clients. Above it, in a splendid room thirty feet by thirty, Jake spent his days behind a massive oak desk that had been used by Lucien, his father, and grandfather. When he was bored, a common occurrence, he walked to the double French doors, opened them and stepped onto the terrace, where he had a fine view of the courthouse and the square.

At 7:00 a.m., on schedule, he sat behind his desk and took a sip of coffee. He looked at his calendar for the day and admitted to himself that it did not look promising or profitable.