

BEFORE *THE LAST JUROR*, THIS IS
WHERE READERS FIRST FELL UNDER
THE SPELL OF FORD COUNTY.

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

JOHN
GRISHAM



A TIME
TO KILL

"GRISHAM IS AN ABSOLUTE MASTER!"
— *The Washington Post*

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A
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A DELL BOOK

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A Dell Book

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Since I am prone to start projects that never quite get finished, my goal when I began writing this book was simply to complete it. I could envision a neat pile of typed pages over in the corner of my office, and one day I would be able to point to it with some measure of pride and explain to clients and friends that it was a novel I had written. Surely, somewhere in the deep recesses of my mind, I dreamed of getting it published, but I honestly can't remember such thoughts, at least not when I started writing. It would become my first prolonged effort at fiction.

I began in the fall of 1984, just three years out of law school and still very wet behind the ears. In those early days of my legal career I spent many hours in courtrooms, watching good lawyers try their cases. I have always been fascinated by courtrooms—still am. People discuss things in open court that they wouldn't dare mention outside their homes. The greatest dramas occur not on screens or stages, but daily in countless courtrooms across this country.

One day I stumbled upon a horrible trial in which a young girl testified against the man who brutally raped her. It was a gut-wrenching experience for me, and I was only a spectator. One moment she was courageous, the next pitifully frail. I was mesmerized. I could not imagine the nightmare she and her family had been through. I wondered what I would do if she were my daughter. As I watched her suffer before the jury, I wanted per-

sonally to shoot the rapist. For one brief yet interminable moment, I wanted to be her father. I wanted justice. There was a story there.

I became obsessed with the idea of a father's retribution. What would a jury of average and ordinary people do to such a father? Naturally there would be a great deal of sympathy, but would there be enough for an acquittal? The idea for this novel emerged over a three-month period in which I thought of little else.

I wrote the first chapter in longhand on a legal pad, and asked Renée, my wife, to read it. She was impressed, and said she would like to read the second chapter. A month later I gave her chapters two and three, and she said she was hooked. Renée reads five or six novels a week—mysteries, suspense, thrillers, espionage, all sorts of fiction—and she has little patience with a story that doesn't work.

I approached the writing of this book much like a hobby, an hour here and an hour there, with a somewhat disciplined effort to write at least a page a day. I never abandoned it. I remember a four-week period in which nothing was written. I occasionally skipped a day, but for the most part I plowed ahead with blind diligence. I thought the story was wonderful, but I wasn't sure about the writing. Renée liked it, so I kept going.

After a year, I was amazed at how quickly the pages had piled up, and I realized that the book was half finished. My original goal was forgotten, and I caught myself thinking of publishing contracts and royalty statements and fancy lunches with agents and editors—the dreams of every unpublished novelist.

Three years after I started, Renée read the last chapter and we shipped it off to New York. The working title was *Deathknell*, a bad idea that was scrapped as soon as

the manuscript landed in the office of my new agent, Jay Garon. Jay had seen the first three chapters, and immediately sent me a contract of representation. Sixteen other agents had passed, as well as a dozen publishers. Jay took the manuscript, and told me to start writing another book. I followed his advice.

A year passed and nothing happened. I was deep into the writing of *The Firm* when Jay called in April 1988 with the wonderful news that this book would indeed be published. Bill Thompson at Wynwood Press had read the manuscript and immediately bought it. Under his guidance, I worked through countless revisions and found a new title, *A Time to Kill*. I think it was the sixth or seventh one I decided on. I'm not good with titles.

Wynwood printed 5,000 copies and published the book in June 1989. It sold well within a hundred miles of home, but was neglected by the rest of the world. There was no paperback deal, no foreign rights. But it was a first novel, and most of them are ignored. Better things were just around the corner.

I finished *The Firm* in 1989, and sent it to Jay. Doubleday/Dell bought it, and when it was published in hardcover in March 1991, my writing career took a dramatic turn. The success of *The Firm* has aroused new interest in *A Time to Kill*.

There's a lot of autobiography in this book. I no longer practice law, but for ten years I did so in a manner very similar to Jake Brigance. I represented people, never banks or insurance companies or big corporations. I was a street lawyer. Jake and I are the same age. I played quarterback in high school, though not very well. Much of what he says and does is what I think I would say and do under the circumstances. We both drive Saabs. We've both felt the unbearable pressure of

murder trials, which is something I tried to capture in the story. We've both lost sleep over clients and vomited in courthouse rest rooms.

This one came from the heart. It's a first novel, and at times it rambles, but I wouldn't change a word if given the chance.

Oxford, Mississippi
January 30, 1992

THE CRITICS LOVE
JOHN GRISHAM
AND
A TIME TO KILL

“JOHN GRISHAM IS ON A ROLL!”

—*The Christian Science Monitor*

“Grisham continues to dazzle with each new legal thriller.”

—*The Milwaukee Journal*

“Grisham has an ear for dialogue and is a skillful craftsman.” —*The New York Times*

“GRISHAM ENRAPTURES US.”

—*The Houston Chronicle*

“Grisham handles all his themes with admirable dexterity and clarity.” —*Los Angeles Times*

“BEG HIM TO KEEP ON WRITING!”

—*The Rockdale Citizen*

“Grisham’s pleasure in relating the byzantine complexities of Clanton (Mississippi) politics is contagious and he tells a good story . . . an enjoyable book.” —*Library Journal*

1

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 Gwen'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.

2

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 punks. The white politicians supported him because, since he 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 sheriff's 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.