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# Chapter 1

After decades of patient mismanagement and loving neglect, *The Ford County Times* went bankrupt in 1970. The owner and publisher, Miss Emma Caudle, was ninety-three years old and strapped to a bed in a nursing home in Tupelo. The editor, her son Wilson Caudle, was in his seventies and had a plate in his head from the First War. A perfect circle of dark grafted skin covered the plate at the top of his long, sloping forehead, and throughout his adult life he had endured the nickname of Spot. Spot did this. Spot did that. Here, Spot. There, Spot.

In his younger years, he covered town meetings, football games, elections, trials, church socials, all sorts of activities in Ford County. He was a good reporter, thorough and intuitive. Evidently, the head wound did not affect his ability to write. But sometime after the Second War the plate apparently shifted, and Mr. Caudle stopped writing everything but the obituaries. He

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loved obituaries. He spent hours on them. He filled paragraphs of eloquent prose detailing the lives of even the humblest of Ford Countians. And the death of a wealthy or prominent citizen was front page news, with Mr. Caudle seizing the moment. He never missed a wake or a funeral, never wrote anything bad about anyone. All received glory in the end. Ford County was a wonderful place to die. And Spot was a very popular man, even though he was crazy.

The only real crisis of his journalistic career happened in 1967, about the time the civil rights movement finally made it to Ford County. The paper had never shown the slightest hint of racial tolerance. No black faces appeared in its pages, except those belonging to known or suspected criminals. No black wedding announcements. No black honor students or baseball teams. But in 1967, Mr. Caudle made a startling discovery. He awoke one morning to the realization that black people were dying in Ford County, and their deaths were not being properly reported. There was a whole, new, fertile world of obituaries waiting out there, and Mr. Caudle set sail in dangerous and uncharted waters. On Wednesday, March 8, 1967, the *Times* became the first white-owned weekly in Mississippi to run the obituary of a Negro. For the most part, it went unnoticed.

The following week, he ran three black obituaries, and people were beginning to talk. By the fourth week, a regular boycott was under

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way, with subscriptions being canceled and advertisers holding their money. Mr. Caudle knew what was happening, but he was too impressed with his new status as an integrationist to worry about such trivial matters as sales and profits. Six weeks after the historic obituary, he announced, on the front page and in bold print, his new policy. He explained to the public that he would publish whatever he damned well pleased, and if the white folks didn't like it, then he would simply cut back on their obituaries.

Now, dying properly is an important part of living in Mississippi, for whites and blacks, and the thought of being laid to rest without the benefit of one of Spot's glorious send-offs was more than most whites could stand. And they knew he was crazy enough to carry out his threat.

The next edition was filled with all sorts of obituaries, blacks and whites, all neatly alphabetized and desegregated. It sold out, and a brief period of prosperity followed.

The bankruptcy was called involuntary, as if others had eager volunteers. The pack was led by a print supplier from Memphis that was owed \$60,000. Several creditors had not been paid in six months. The old Security Bank was calling in a loan.

I was new, but I'd heard the rumors. I was sitting on a desk in the front room of the *Times's* offices reading a magazine, when a midget in a pair of pointed toes strutted in the front door and asked for Wilson Caudle.

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‘He’s at the funeral home,’ I said.

He was a cocky midget. I could see a gun on his hip under a wrinkled navy blazer, a gun worn in such a manner so that folks would see it. He probably had a permit, but in Ford County one was not really needed, not in 1970. In fact, permits were frowned upon. ‘I need to serve these papers on him,’ he said, waving an envelope.

I was not about to be helpful, but it’s difficult being rude to a midget. Even one with a gun. ‘He’s at the funeral home,’ I repeated.

‘Then I’ll just leave them with you,’ he declared.

Although I’d been around for less than two months, and though I’d gone to college up North, I had learned a few things. I knew that good papers were not served on people. They were mailed or shipped or hand-delivered, but never served. The papers were trouble, and I wanted no part of them.

‘I’m not taking the papers,’ I said, looking down.

The laws of nature require midgets to be docile, noncombative people, and this little fella was no exception. The gun was a ruse. He glanced around the front office with a smirk, but he knew the situation was hopeless. With a flair for the dramatic, he stuffed the envelope back into his pocket and demanded, ‘Where’s the funeral home?’

I pointed this way and that, and he left. An

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hour later, Spot stumbled through the door, waving the papers and bawling hysterically. 'It's over! It's over!' he kept wailing as I held the Petition for Involuntary Bankruptcy. Margaret Wright, the secretary, and Hardy, the pressman, came from the back and tried to console him. He sat in a chair, face in hands, elbows on knees, sobbing pitifully. I read the petition aloud for the benefit of the others.

It said Mr. Caudle had to appear in court in a week over in Oxford to meet with the creditors and the Judge, and that a decision would be made as to whether the paper would continue to operate while a trustee sorted things out. I could tell Margaret and Hardy were more concerned about their jobs than about Mr. Caudle and his breakdown, but they gamely stood next to him and patted his shoulders.

When the crying stopped, he suddenly stood, bit his lip, and announced, 'I've got to tell Mother.'

The three of us looked at each other. Miss Emma Caudle had departed this life years earlier, but her feeble heart continued to work just barely enough to postpone a funeral. She neither knew nor cared what color Jell-O they were feeding her, and she certainly cared nothing about Ford County and its newspaper. She was blind and deaf and weighed less than eighty pounds, and now Spot was about to discuss involuntary bankruptcy with her. At that point, I realized that he, too, was no longer with us.

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He started crying again and left. Six months later I would write his obituary.

Because I had attended college, and because I was holding the papers, Hardy and Margaret looked hopefully at me for advice. I was a journalist, not a lawyer, but I said that I would take the papers to the Caudle family lawyer. We would follow his advice. They smiled weakly and returned to work.

At noon, I bought a six-pack at Quincy's One Stop in Lowtown, the black section of Clanton, and went for a long drive in my Spitfire. It was late in February, unseasonably warm, so I put the top down and headed for the lake, wondering, not for the first time, just exactly what I was doing in Ford County, Mississippi.

I grew up in Memphis and studied journalism at Syracuse for five years before my grandmother got tired of paying for what was becoming an extended education. My grades were unremarkable, and I was a year away from a degree. Maybe a year and a half. She, BeeBee, had plenty of money, hated to spend it, and after five years she figured my opportunity had been sufficiently funded. When she cut me off I was very disappointed, but I did not complain, to her anyway. I was her only grandchild and her estate would be a delight.

I studied journalism with a hangover. In the early days at Syracuse, I aspired to be an investigative reporter with the *New York Times* or

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the *Washington Post*. I wanted to save the world by uncovering corruption and environmental abuse and government waste and the injustice suffered by the weak and oppressed. Pulitzers were waiting for me. After a year or so of such lofty dreams, I saw a movie about a foreign correspondent who dashed around the world looking for wars, seducing beautiful women, and somehow finding the time to write award-winning stories. He spoke eight languages, wore a beard, combat boots, starched khakis that never wrinkled. So I decided I would become such a journalist. I grew a beard, bought some boots and khakis, tried to learn German, tried to score with prettier girls. During my junior year, when my grades began their steady decline to the bottom of the class, I became captivated by the idea of working for a small-town newspaper. I cannot explain this attraction, except that it was at about this time that I met and befriended Nick Diener. He was from rural Indiana, and for decades his family had owned a rather prosperous county newspaper. He drove a fancy little Alfa Romeo and always had plenty of cash. We became close friends.

Nick was a bright student who could have handled medicine, law, or engineering. His only goal, however, was to return to Indiana and run the family business. This baffled me until we got drunk one night and he told me how much his father cleared each year off their small weekly – circulation six thousand. It was a gold mine, he

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said. Just local news, wedding announcements, church socials, honor rolls, sports coverage, pictures of basketball teams, a few recipes, a few obituaries, and pages of advertising. Maybe a little politics, but stay away from controversy. And count your money. His father was a millionaire. It was laid-back, low-pressure journalism with money growing on trees, according to Nick.

This appealed to me. After my fourth year, which should've been my last but wasn't close, I spent the summer interning at a small weekly in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas. The pay was peanuts but BeeBee was impressed because I was employed. Each week I mailed her the paper, at least half of which was written by me. The owner/editor/publisher was a wonderful old gentleman who was delighted to have a reporter who wanted to write. He was quite wealthy.

After five years at Syracuse my grades were irreparable, and the well ran dry. I returned to Memphis, visited BeeBee, thanked her for her efforts, and told her I loved her. She told me to find a job.

At the time Wilson Caudle's sister lived in Memphis, and through the course of things this lady met BeeBee at one of those hot tea drinkers' parties. After a few phone calls back and forth, I was packed and headed to Clanton, Mississippi, where Spot was eagerly waiting. After an hour of orientation, he turned me loose on Ford County.

In the next edition he ran a sweet little story

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with a photo of me announcing my ‘internship’ at the *Times*. It made the front page. News was slow in those days.

The announcement contained two horrendous errors that would haunt me for years. The first and less serious was the fact that Syracuse had now joined the Ivy League, at least according to Spot. He informed his dwindling readership that I had received my Ivy League education at Syracuse. It was a month before anyone mentioned this to me. I was beginning to believe that no one read the paper, or, worse, those who did were complete idiots.

The second misstatement changed my life. I was born Joyner William Traynor. Until I was twelve I hammered my parents with inquiries about why two supposedly intelligent people would stick Joyner on a newborn. The story finally leaked that one of my parents, both of whom denied responsibility, had insisted on Joyner as an olive branch to some feuding relative who allegedly had money. I never met the man, my namesake. He died broke as far as I was concerned, but I nonetheless had Joyner for a lifetime. When I enrolled at Syracuse I was J. William, a rather imposing name for an eighteen-year-old. But Vietnam and the riots and all the rebellion and social upheaval convinced me that J. William sounded too corporate, too establishment. I became Will.

Spot at various times called me Will, William, Bill, or even Billy, and since I would answer to all

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of them I never knew what was next. In the announcement, under my smiling face, was my new name. Willie Traynor. I was horrified. I had never dreamed of anyone calling me Willie. I went to a prep school in Memphis and then to college in New York, and I had never met a person named Willie. I wasn't a good ole boy. I drove a Triumph Spitfire and had long hair.

What would I tell my fraternity brothers at Syracuse? What would I tell BeeBee?

After hiding in my apartment for two days, I mustered the courage to confront Spot and demand he do something. I wasn't sure what, but he'd made the mistake and he could damned well fix it. I marched into the *Times* office and bumped into Davey Bigmouth Bass, the sports editor of the paper. 'Hey, cool name,' he said. I followed him into his office, seeking advice.

'My name's not Willie,' I said.

'It is now.'

'My name's Will.'

'They'll love you around here. A smart-ass from up North with long hair and a little imported sports car. Hell, folks'll think you're pretty cool with a name like Willie. Think of Joe Willie.'

'Who's Joe Willie?'

'Joe Willie Namath.'

'Oh him.'

'Yeah, he's a Yankee like you, from Pennsylvania or some place, but when he got to Alabama he went from Joseph William to Joe

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Willie. The girls chased him all over the place.’

I began to feel better. In 1970, Joe Namath was probably the most famous athlete in the country. I went for a drive and kept repeating ‘Willie.’ Within a couple of weeks the name was beginning to stick. Everybody called me Willie and seemed to feel more comfortable because I had such a down-to-earth name.

I told BeeBee it was just a temporary pseudonym.

The *Times* was a very thin paper, and I knew immediately that it was in trouble. Heavy on the obits, light on news and advertising. The employees were disgruntled, but quiet and loyal. Jobs were scarce in Ford County in 1970. After a week it was obvious even to my novice eyes that the paper was operating at a loss. Obits are free – ads are not. Spot spent most of his time in his cluttered office, napping periodically and calling the funeral home. Sometimes they called him. Sometimes the families would stop just hours after Uncle Wilber’s last breath and hand over a long, flowery, handwritten narrative that Spot would seize and carry delicately to his desk. Behind a locked door, he would write, edit, research, and rewrite until it was perfect.

He told me the entire county was mine to cover. The paper had one other general reporter, Baggy Suggs, a pickled old goat who spent his hours hanging around the courthouse across the street sniffing for gossip and drinking bourbon

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with a small club of washed-up lawyers too old and too drunk to practice anymore. As I would soon learn, Baggy was too lazy to check sources and dig for anything interesting, and it was not unusual for his front page story to be some dull account of a boundary dispute or a wife beating.

Margaret, the secretary, was a fine Christian lady who ran the place, though she was smart enough to allow Spot to think he was the boss. She was in her early fifties and had worked there for twenty years. She was the rock, the anchor, and everything at the *Times* revolved around her. Margaret was soft-spoken, almost shy, and from day one was completely intimidated by me because I was from Memphis and had gone to school up North for five years. I was careful not to wear my Ivy Leagueness on my shoulder, but at the same time I wanted these rural Mississippians to know that I had been superbly educated.

She and I became gossiping pals, and after a week she confirmed what I already suspected – that Mr. Caudle was indeed crazy, and that the newspaper was indeed in dire financial straits. But, she said, the Caudles have family money!

It would be years before I understood this mystery.

In Mississippi, family money was not to be confused with wealth. It had nothing to do with cash or other assets. Family money was a status, obtained by someone who was white, somewhat educated beyond high school, born in a large

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home with a front porch – preferably one surrounded by cotton or soybean fields, although this was not mandatory – and partially reared by a beloved black maid named Bessie or Pearl, partially reared by doting grandparents who once owned the ancestors of Bessie or Pearl, and lectured from birth on the stringent social graces of a privileged people. Acreage and trust funds helped somewhat, but Mississippi was full of insolvent blue bloods who inherited the status of family money. It could not be earned. It had to be handed down at birth.

When I talked to the Caudle family lawyer, he explained, rather succinctly, the real value of their family money. ‘They’re as poor as Job’s turkey,’ he said as I sat deep in a worn leather chair and looked up at him across his wide and ancient mahogany desk. His name was Walter Sullivan, of the prestigious Sullivan & O’Hara firm. Prestigious for Ford County – seven lawyers. He studied the bankruptcy petition and rambled on about the Caudles and the money they used to have and how foolish they’d been in running a once profitable paper into the ground. He’d represented them for thirty years, and back when Miss Emma ran things the *Times* had five thousand subscribers and pages filled with advertisements. She kept a \$500,000 certificate of deposit at Security Bank, just for a rainy day.

Then her husband died, and she remarried a local alcoholic twenty years her junior. When sober, he was semiliterate and fancied himself as

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a tortured poet and essayist. Miss Emma loved him dearly and installed him as coeditor, a position he used to write long editorials blasting everything that moved in Ford County. It was the beginning of the end. Spot hated his new stepfather, the feelings were mutual, and their relationship finally climaxed with one of the more colorful fistfights in the history of downtown Clanton. It took place on the sidewalk in front of the *Times* office, on the downtown square, in front of a large and stunned crowd. The locals believed that Spot's brain, already fragile, took additional damage that day. Shortly thereafter, he began writing nothing but those damned obituaries.

The stepfather ran off with her money, and Miss Emma, heartbroken, became a recluse.

'It was once a fine paper,' Mr. Sullivan said. 'But look at it now. Less than twelve hundred subscriptions, heavily in debt. Bankrupt.'

'What will the court do?' I asked.

'Try and find a buyer.'

'A buyer?'

'Yes, someone will buy. The county has to have a newspaper.'

I immediately thought of two people – Nick Diener and BeeBee. Nick's family had become rich off their county weekly. BeeBee was already loaded and she had only one beloved grandchild. My heart began pounding as I smelled opportunity.

Mr. Sullivan watched me intently, and it was

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obvious he knew what I was thinking. 'It could be bought for a song,' he said.

'How much?' I asked with all the confidence of a twenty-three-year-old cub reporter whose grandmother was as stout as lye soap.

'Probably fifty thousand. Twenty-five for the paper, twenty-five to operate. Most of the debts can be bankrupted, then renegotiated with the creditors you need.' He paused and leaned forward, elbows on his desk, thick grayish eyebrows twitching as if his brain was working overtime. 'It could be a real gold mine, you know.'

BeeBee had never invested in a gold mine, but after three days of priming the pump I left Memphis with a check for \$50,000. I gave it to Mr. Sullivan, who put it in a trust account and petitioned the court for the sale of the paper. The Judge, a relic who belonged in the bed next to Miss Emma, nodded benignly and scrawled his name on an order that made me the new owner of *The Ford County Times*.

It takes at least three generations to be accepted in Ford County. Regardless of money or breeding, one cannot simply move there and be trusted. A dark cloud of suspicion hangs over any newcomer, and I was no exception. The people there are exceedingly warm and gracious and polite, almost to the point of being nosy with their friendliness. They nod and speak to everyone on the downtown streets. They ask about

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your health, the weather, and they invite you to church. They rush to help strangers.

But they don't really trust you unless they trusted your grandfather.

Once word spread that I, a young green alien from Memphis, had bought the paper for fifty, or maybe a hundred, or perhaps even two hundred thousand dollars, a great wave of gossip shook the community. Margaret gave me the updates. Because I was single, there was a chance I was a homosexual. Because I went to Syracuse, wherever that was, then I was probably a Communist. Or worse, a liberal. Because I was from Memphis, I was a subversive intent on embarrassing Ford County.

Just the same, as they all conceded quietly among themselves, I now controlled the obituaries! I was somebody!

The new *Times* debuted on March 18, 1970, only three weeks after the midget arrived with his papers. It was almost an inch thick and loaded with more photos than had ever been published in a county weekly. Cub Scout troops, Brownies, junior high basketball teams, garden clubs, book clubs, tea clubs, Bible study groups, adult softball teams, civic clubs. Dozens of photos. I tried to include every living soul in the county. And the dead ones were exalted like never before. The obits were embarrassingly long. I'm sure Spot was proud, but I never heard from him.

The news was light and breezy. Absolutely no  
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editorials. People love to read about crime, so on the bottom left-hand corner of the front page I launched the Crime Notes Section. Thankfully, two pickups had been stolen the week before, and I covered these heists as if Fort Knox had been looted.

In the center of the front page there was a rather large group shot of the new regime – Margaret, Hardy, Baggy Suggs, me, our photographer, Wiley Meek, Davey Bigmouth Bass, and Melanie Dogan, a high school student and part-time employee. I was proud of my staff. We had worked around the clock for ten days, and our first edition was a great success. We printed five thousand copies and sold them all. I sent a box of them to BeeBee, and she was most impressed.

For the next month, the new *Times* slowly took shape as I struggled to determine what I wanted it to become. Change is painful in rural Mississippi, so I decided to do it gradually. The old paper was bankrupt, but it had changed little in fifty years. I wrote more news, sold more ads, included more and more pictures of groups of endless varieties. And I worked hard on the obituaries.

I had never been attracted to long hours, but since I was the owner I forgot about the clock. I was too young and too busy to be scared. I was twenty-three, and through luck and timing and a rich grandmother, I was suddenly the owner of a weekly newspaper. If I had hesitated and studied

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the situation, and sought advice from bankers and accountants, I'm sure someone would have talked some sense into me. But when you're twenty-three, you're fearless. You have nothing, so there's nothing to lose.

I figured it would take a year to become profitable. And, at first, revenue increased slowly. Then Rhoda Kassellaw was murdered. I guess it's the nature of the business to sell more papers after a brutal crime when people want details. We sold twenty-four hundred papers the week before her death, and almost four thousand the week after.

It was no ordinary murder.

Ford County was a peaceful place, filled with people who were either Christians or claimed to be. Fistfights were common, but they were usually the work of the lower classes who hung around beer joints and such. Once a month a redneck would take a shot at a neighbor or perhaps his own wife, and each weekend had at least one stabbing in the black tonks. Death rarely followed these episodes.

I owned the paper for ten years, from 1970 to 1980, and we reported very few murders in Ford County. None was as brutal as Rhoda Kassellaw's; none was as premeditated. Thirty years later, I still think about it every day.

## Chapter 2

Rhoda Kassellaw lived in the Beech Hill community, twelve miles north of Clanton, in a modest gray brick house on a narrow, paved country road. The flower beds along the front of the house were weedless and received daily care, and between them and the road the long wide lawn was thick and well cut. The driveway was crushed white rock. Scattered down both sides of it was a collection of scooters and balls and bikes. Her two small children were always outdoors, playing hard, sometimes stopping to watch a passing car.

It was a pleasant little country house, a stone's throw from Mr. and Mrs. Deece next door. The young man who bought it was killed in a trucking accident somewhere in Texas, and, at the age of twenty-eight, Rhoda became a widow. The insurance on his life paid off the house and the car. The balance was invested to provide a modest monthly income that allowed her to

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remain home and dote on the children. She spent hours outside, tending her vegetable garden, potting flowers, pulling weeds, mulching the beds along the front of the house.

She kept to herself. The old ladies in Beech Hill considered her a model widow, staying home, looking sad, limiting her social appearances to an occasional visit to church. She should attend more regularly, they whispered.

Shortly after the death of her husband, Rhoda planned to return to her family in Missouri. She was not from Ford County, nor was her husband. A job took them there. But the house was paid for, the kids were happy, the neighbors were nice, and her family was much too concerned about how much life insurance she'd collected. So she stayed, always thinking of leaving but never doing so.

Rhoda Kassellaw was a beautiful woman when she wanted to be, which was not very often. Her shapely, thin figure was usually camouflaged under a loose cotton drip-dry dress, or a bulky chambray workshirt, which she preferred when gardening. She wore little makeup and kept her long flaxen-colored hair pulled back and stuck together on top of her head. Most of what she ate came from her organic garden, and her skin had a soft healthy glow to it. Such an attractive young widow would normally have been a hot property in the county, but she kept to herself.

After three years of mourning, however, Rhoda became restless. She was not getting

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younger; the years were slipping by. She was too young and too pretty to sit at home every Saturday and read bedtime stories. There had to be some action out there, though there was certainly none in Beech Hill.

She hired a young black girl from down the road to baby-sit, and Rhoda drove north for an hour to the Tennessee line, where she'd heard there were some respectable lounges and dance clubs. Maybe no one would know her there. She enjoyed the dancing and the flirting, but she never drank and always came home early. It became a routine, two or three times a month.

Then the jeans got tighter, the dancing faster, the hours longer and longer. She was getting noticed and talked about in the bars and clubs along the state line.

He followed her home twice before he killed her. It was March, and a warm front had brought a premature hope of spring. It was a dark night, with no moon. Bear, the family mutt, sniffed him first as he crept behind a tree in the backyard. Bear was primed to growl and bark when he was forever silenced.

Rhoda's son Michael was five and her daughter Teresa was three. They wore matching Disney cartoon pajamas, neatly pressed, and watched their mother's glowing eyes as she read them the story of Jonah and the whale. She tucked them in and kissed them good night, and when Rhoda turned off the light to their bedroom, he was already in the house.

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An hour later she turned off the television, locked the doors, and waited for Bear, who did not appear. That was no surprise because he often chased rabbits and squirrels into the woods and came home late. Bear would sleep on the back porch and wake her howling at dawn. In her bedroom, she slipped out of her light cotton dress and opened the closet door. He was waiting in there, in the dark.

He snatched her from behind, covered her mouth with a thick and sweaty hand, and said, 'I have a knife. I'll cut you and your kids.' With the other hand he held up a shiny blade and waved it before her eyes.

'Understand?' he hissed into her ear.

She trembled and managed to shake her head. She couldn't see what he looked like. He threw her to the floor of the cluttered closet, face down, and yanked her hands behind her. He took a brown wool scarf an old aunt had given her and wrapped it roughly around her face. 'Not one sound,' he kept growling at her. 'Or I'll cut your kids.' When the blindfold was finished he grabbed her hair, snatched her to her feet, and dragged her to her bed. He poked the tip of the blade into her chin and said, 'Don't fight me. The knife's right here.' He cut off her panties and the rape began.

He wanted to see her eyes, those beautiful eyes he'd seen in the clubs. And the long hair. He'd bought her drinks and danced with her twice, and when he'd finally made a move she had stiff-

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armed him. Try these moves, baby, he mumbled just loud enough for her to hear.

He and the Jack Daniel's had been building courage for three hours, and now the whiskey numbed him. He moved slowly above her, not rushing things, enjoying every second of it. He mumbled in the self-satisfying grunts of a real man taking and getting what he wanted.

The smell of the whiskey and his sweat nauseated her, but she was too frightened to throw up. It might anger him, cause him to use the knife. As she started to accept the horror of the moment, she began to think. Keep it quiet. Don't wake up the kids. And what will he do with the knife when he's finished?

His movements were faster, he was mumbling louder. 'Quiet, baby,' he hissed again and again. 'I'll use the knife.' The wrought-iron bed was squeaking; didn't get used enough, he told himself. Too much noise, but he didn't care.

The rattling of the bed woke Michael, who then got Teresa up. They eased from their room and crept down the dark hall to see what was happening. Michael opened the door to his mother's bedroom, saw the strange man on top of her, and said, 'Mommy!' For a second the man stopped and jerked his head toward the children.

The sound of the boy's voice horrified Rhoda, who bolted upward and thrust both hands at her assailant, grabbing whatever she could. One small fist caught him in the left eye, a solid shot

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that stunned him. Then she yanked off her blindfold while kicking with both legs. He slapped her and tried to pin her down again. ‘Danny Padgitt!’ she shouted, still clawing. He hit her once more.

‘Mommy!’ Michael cried.

‘Run, kids!’ Rhoda tried to scream, but she was struck dumb by her assailant’s blows.

‘Shut up!’ Padgitt yelled.

‘Run!’ Rhoda shouted again, and the children backed away, then darted down the hallway, into the kitchen, and outside to safety.

In the split second after she shouted his name, Padgitt realized he had no choice but to silence her. He took the knife and hacked twice, then scrambled from the bed and grabbed his clothing.

Mr. and Mrs. Aaron Deece were watching late television from Memphis when they heard Michael’s voice calling and getting closer. Mr. Deece met the boy at the front door. His pajamas were soaked with sweat and dew and his teeth were chattering so violently he had trouble speaking. ‘He hurt my mommy!’ he kept saying. ‘He hurt my mommy!’

Through the darkness between the two houses, Mr. Deece saw Teresa running after her brother. She was almost running in place, as if she wanted to get to one place without leaving the other. When Mrs. Deece finally got to her by the Deece garage, she was sucking her thumb and unable to speak.

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Mr. Deece raced into his den and grabbed two shotguns, one for him, one for his wife. The children were in the kitchen, shocked to the point of being paralyzed. 'He hurt Mommy,' Michael kept saying. Mrs. Deece cuddled them, told them everything would be fine. She looked at her shotgun when her husband laid it on the table. 'Stay here,' he said as he rushed out of the house.

He did not go far. Rhoda almost made it to the Deece home before she collapsed in the wet grass. She was completely naked, and from the neck down covered in blood. He picked her up and carried her to the front porch, then shouted at his wife to move the children toward the back of the house and lock them in a bedroom. He could not allow them to see their mother in her last moments.

As he placed her in the swing, Rhoda whispered, 'Danny Padgitt. It was Danny Padgitt.'

He covered her with a quilt, then called an ambulance.

Danny Padgitt kept his pickup in the center of the road and drove ninety miles an hour. He was half-drunk and scared as hell but unwilling to admit it. He'd be home in ten minutes, secure in the family's little kingdom known as Padgitt Island.

Those little faces had ruined everything. He'd think about it tomorrow. He took a long pull on the fifth of Jack Daniel's and felt better.

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It was a rabbit or a small dog or some varmint, and when it darted from the shoulder he caught a glimpse of it and reacted badly. He instinctively hit the brake pedal, just for a split second because he really didn't care what he hit and rather enjoyed the sport of roadkilling, but he'd punched too hard. The rear tires locked and the pickup fishtailed. Before he realized it Danny was in serious trouble. He jerked the wheel one way, the wrong way, and the truck hit the gravel shoulder where it began to spin like a stock car on the backstretch. It slid into the ditch, flipped twice, then crashed into a row of pine trees. If he'd been sober he would've been killed, but drunks walk away.

He crawled out through a shattered window, and for a long while leaned on the truck, counting his cuts and scratches and considering his options. A leg was suddenly stiff, and as he climbed up the bank to the road he realized he could not walk far. Not that he would need to.

The blue lights were on him before he realized it. The deputy was out of the car, surveying the scene with a long black flashlight. More flashing lights appeared down the road.

The deputy saw the blood, smelled the whiskey, and reached for the handcuffs.

## Chapter 3

The Big Brown River drops nonchalantly south from Tennessee and runs as straight as a hand-dug channel for thirty miles through the center of Tyler County, Mississippi. Two miles above the Ford County line it begins twisting and looping, and by the time it leaves Tyler County it looks like a scared snake, curling desperately and going nowhere. Its water is thick and heavy, muddy and slow, shallow in most places. The Big Brown is not known for its beauty. Sand, silt, and gravel bars line its innumerable bends and curves. A hundred sloughs and creeks feed it with an inexhaustible supply of slow-moving water.

Its journey through Ford County is brief. It dips and forms a wide circle around two thousand acres in the northeasternmost corner of the county, then leaves and heads back toward Tennessee. The circle is almost perfect and an island is almost formed, but at the last moment

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