

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# The Client

John Grisham

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## About the Book

A US State Senator is dead, and 11-year-old Mark Sway is the only one who knows where the body is hidden.

The FBI want him to tell them where it is at whatever cost to Mark and his family.

The killer wants him silenced forever.

Reggie Love has been practising law for less than five years. Only she can save Mark from these twin threats. Together they must take on the might of the State and the wiles of a cold-blooded killer.

## About the Author

John Grisham is the bestselling author of twenty-two novels, one work of non-fiction, a collection of short stories, and a novel for young readers. He lives in Virginia and Mississippi.

*Also available by John Grisham*

*Fiction*

A Time to Kill  
The Firm  
The Pelican Brief  
The Chamber  
The Rainmaker  
The Runaway Jury  
The Partner  
The Street Lawyer  
The Testament  
The Brethren  
A Painted House  
Skipping Christmas  
The Summons  
The King of Torts  
Bleachers  
The Last Juror  
The Broker  
Playing for Pizza  
The Appeal  
The Associate  
Ford County  
Theodore Boone: Young Lawyer  
The Confession

*Non-fiction*

The Innocent Man

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*To Ty and Shea*



# Chapter 1

Mark was eleven and had been smoking off and on for two years, never trying to quit but being careful not to get hooked. He preferred Kools, his ex-father's brand, but his mother smoked Virginia Slims at the rate of two packs a day, and he could in an average week pilfer ten or twelve from her. She was a busy woman with many problems, perhaps a little naive when it came to her boys, and she never dreamed her eldest would be smoking at the age of eleven.

Occasionally Kevin, the delinquent two streets over, would sell Mark a pack of stolen Marlboros for a dollar. But for the most part he had to rely on his mother's skinny cigarettes.

He had four of them in his pocket this afternoon as he led his brother Ricky, age eight, down the path into the woods behind their trailer park. Ricky was nervous about this, his first smoke. He had caught Mark hiding the cigarettes in a shoe box under his bed yesterday, and threatened to tell all if his big brother didn't show him how to do it. They sneaked along the wooded trail, headed for one of Mark's secret spots where he'd spent many solitary hours trying to inhale and blow smoke rings.

Most of the other kids in the neighborhood were into beer and pot, two vices Mark was determined to avoid. Their ex-father was an alcoholic who'd beaten both boys

and their mother, and the beatings always followed nasty bouts with beer. Mark had seen and felt the effects of alcohol. He was also afraid of drugs.

‘Are you lost?’ Ricky asked, just like a little brother, as they left the trail and waded through chest-high weeds.

‘Just shut up,’ Mark said without slowing. The only time their father had spent at home was to drink and sleep and abuse them. He was gone now, thank heavens. For five years Mark had been in charge of Ricky. He felt like an eleven-year-old father. He’d taught him how to throw a football and ride a bike. He’d explained what he knew about sex. He’d warned him about drugs, and protected him from bullies. And he felt terrible about this introduction to vice. But it was just a cigarette. It could be much worse.

The weeds stopped and they were under a large tree with a rope hanging from a thick branch. A row of bushes yielded to a small clearing, and beyond it an overgrown dirt road disappeared over a hill. A highway could be heard in the distance.

Mark stopped and pointed to a log near the rope. ‘Sit there,’ he instructed, and Ricky obediently backed onto the log and glanced around anxiously as if the police might be watching. Mark eyed him like a drill sergeant while picking a cigarette from his shirt pocket. He held it with his right thumb and index finger, and tried to be casual about it.

‘You know the rules,’ he said, looking down at Ricky. There were only two rules, and they had discussed them a dozen times during the day, and Ricky was frustrated at being treated like a child. He rolled his eyes away and said, ‘Yeah, if I tell anyone, you’ll beat me up.’

‘That’s right.’

Ricky folded his arms. ‘And I can smoke only one a day.’

‘That’s right. If I catch you smoking more than that, then you’re in trouble. And if I find out you’re drinking beer or messing with drugs, then –’

'I know, I know. You'll beat me up again.'

'Right.'

'How many do you smoke a day?'

'Only one,' Mark lied. Some days, only one. Some days, three or four, depending on supply. He stuck the filter between his lips like a gangster.

'Will one a day kill me?' Ricky asked.

Mark removed the cigarette from his lips. 'Not anytime soon. One a day is pretty safe. More than that, and you could be in trouble.'

'How many does Mom smoke a day?'

'Two packs.'

'How many is that?'

'Forty.'

'Wow. Then she's in big trouble.'

'Mom's got all kinds of troubles. I don't think she's worried about cigarettes.'

'How many does Dad smoke a day?'

'Four or five packs. A hundred a day.'

Ricky grinned slightly. 'Then he's gonna die soon, right?'

'I hope so. Between staying drunk and chain-smoking, he'll be dead in a few years.'

'What's chain-smoking?'

'It's when you light the new one with the old one. I wish he'd smoke ten packs a day.'

'Me too.' Ricky glanced toward the small clearing and the dirt road. It was shady and cool under the tree, but beyond the limbs the sun was bright. Mark pinched the filter with his thumb and index finger and sort of waved it before his mouth. 'Are you scared?' he sneered as only big brothers can.

'No.'

'I think you are. Look, hold it like this, okay?' He waved it closer, then with great drama withdrew it and stuck it between his lips. Ricky watched intently.

Mark lit the cigarette, puffed a tiny cloud of smoke, then held it and admired it. 'Don't try to swallow the smoke. You're not ready for that yet. Just suck a little then blow the smoke out. Are you ready?'

'Will it make me sick?'

'It will if you swallow the smoke.' He took two quick drags and puffed for effect. 'See. It's really easy. I'll teach you how to inhale later.'

'Okay.' Ricky nervously reached out with his thumb and index finger, and Mark placed the cigarette carefully between them. 'Go ahead.'

Ricky eased the wet filter to his lips. His hand shook and he took a short drag and blew smoke. Another short drag. The smoke never got past his front teeth. Another drag. Mark watched carefully, hoping he would choke and cough and turn blue, then get sick and never smoke again.

'It's easy,' Ricky said proudly as he held the cigarette and admired it. His hand was shaking.

'It's no big deal.'

'Tastes kind of funny.'

'Yeah, yeah.' Mark sat next to him on the log and picked another one from his pocket. Ricky puffed rapidly. Mark lit his, and they sat in silence under the tree enjoying a quiet smoke.

'This is fun,' Ricky said, nibbling at the filter.

'Great. Then why are your hands shaking?'

'They're not.'

'Sure.'

Ricky ignored this. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, took a longer drag, then spat in the dirt like he'd seen Kevin and the big boys do behind the trailer park. This was easy.

Mark opened his mouth into a perfect circle and attempted a smoke ring. He thought this would really impress his little brother, but the ring failed to form and the gray smoke dissipated.

'I think you're too young to smoke,' he said.

Ricky was busy puffing and spitting, and thoroughly enjoying this giant step toward manhood. 'How old were you when you started?' he asked.

'Nine. But I was more mature than you.'

'You always say that.'

'That's because it's always true.'

They sat next to each other on the log under the tree, smoking quietly and staring at the grassy clearing beyond the shade. Mark was in fact more mature than Ricky at the age of eight. He was more mature than any kid his age. He'd always been mature. He had hit his father with a baseball bat when he was seven. The aftermath had not been pretty, but the drunken idiot had stopped beating their mother. There had been many fights and many beatings, and Dianne Sway had sought refuge and advice from her eldest son. They had consoled each other and conspired to survive. They had cried together after the beatings. They had plotted ways to protect Ricky. When he was nine, Mark convinced her to file for divorce. He had called the cops when his father showed up drunk after being served with divorce papers. He had testified in court about the abuse and neglect and beatings. He was very mature.

Ricky heard the car first. There was a low, rushing sound coming from the dirt road. Then Mark heard it, and they stopped smoking. 'Just sit still,' Mark said softly. They did not move.

A long, black, shiny Lincoln appeared over the slight hill and eased toward them. The weeds in the road were as high as the front bumper. Mark dropped his cigarette to the ground and covered it with his shoe. Ricky did the same.

The car slowed almost to a stop as it neared the clearing, then circled around, touching the tree limbs as it moved slowly. It stopped and faced the road. The boys were directly behind it, and hidden from view. Mark slid off the

log, and crawled through the weeds to a row of brush at the edge of the clearing. Ricky followed. The rear of the Lincoln was thirty feet away. They watched it carefully. It had Louisiana license plates.

‘What’s he doing?’ Ricky whispered.

Mark peeked through the weeds. ‘Shhhhhh!’ He had heard stories around the trailer park of teenagers using these woods to meet girls and smoke pot, but this car did not belong to a teenager. The engine quit, and the car just sat there in the weeds for a minute. Then the door opened, and the driver stepped into the weeds and looked around. He was a chubby man in a black suit. His head was fat and round and without hair except for neat rows above the ears and a black-and-gray beard. He stumbled to the rear of the car, fumbled with the keys, and finally opened the trunk. He removed a water hose, stuck one end into the exhaust pipe, and ran the other end through a crack in the left rear window. He closed the trunk, looked around again as if he were expecting to be watched, then disappeared into the car.

The engine started.

‘Wow,’ Mark said softly, staring blankly at the car.

‘What’s he doing?’ Ricky asked.

‘He’s trying to kill himself.’

Ricky raised his head a few inches for a better view. ‘I don’t understand, Mark.’

‘Keep down. You see the hose, right? The fumes from the tail pipe go into the car, and it kills him.’

‘You mean suicide?’

‘Right. I saw a guy do it like this in a movie once.’

They leaned closer to the weeds and stared at the hose running from the pipe to the window. The engine idled smoothly.

‘Why does he want to kill himself?’ Ricky asked.

‘How am I supposed to know? But we gotta do something.’

'Yeah, let's get the hell outta here.'

'No. Just be still a minute.'

'I'm leaving, Mark. You can watch him die if you want to, but I'm gone.'

Mark grabbed his brother's shoulder and forced him lower. Ricky's breathing was heavy and they were both sweating. The sun hid behind a cloud.

'How long does it take?' Ricky asked, his voice quivering.

'Not very long.' Mark released his brother and eased on to all fours. 'You stay here, okay. If you move, I'll kick your tail.'

'What're you doing, Mark?'

'Just stay here. I mean it.' Mark lowered his thin body almost to the ground and crawled on elbows and knees through the weeds toward the car. The grass was dry and at least two feet tall. He knew the man couldn't hear him, but he worried about the movement of the weeds. He stayed directly behind the car and slid snakelike on his belly until he was in the shadow of the trunk. He reached and carefully eased the hose from the tail pipe, and dropped it to the ground. He retraced his trail with a bit more speed, and seconds later was crouched next to Ricky, watching and waiting in the heavier grass and brush under the outermost limbs of the tree. He knew that if they were spotted, they could dart past the tree and down their trail and be gone before the chubby man could catch them.

They waited. Five minutes passed, though it seemed like an hour.

'You think he's dead?' Ricky whispered, his voice dry and weak.

'I don't know.'

Suddenly, the door opened, and the man stepped out. He was crying and mumbling, and he staggered to the rear of the car where he saw the hose in the grass, and cursed it as he shoved it back into the tail pipe. He held a bottle of

whiskey and looked around wildly at the trees, then stumbled back into the car. He mumbled to himself as he slammed the door.

The boys watched in horror.

'He's crazy as hell,' Mark said faintly.

'Let's get out of here,' Ricky said.

'We can't! If he kills himself, and we saw it or knew about it, then we could get in all kinds of trouble.'

Ricky raised his head as if to retreat. 'Then we won't tell anybody. Come on, Mark!'

Mark grabbed his shoulder again and forced him to the ground. 'Just stay down! We're not leaving until I say we're leaving!'

Ricky closed his eyes tightly and started crying. Mark shook his head in disgust but didn't take his eyes off the car. Little brothers were more trouble than they were worth. 'Stop it,' he growled through clenched teeth.

'I'm scared.'

'Fine. Just don't move, okay. Do you hear me? Don't move. And stop the crying.' Mark was back on his elbows, deep in the weeds and preparing to ease through the tall grass once more.

'Just let him die, Mark,' Ricky whispered between sobs.

Mark glared at him over his shoulder and eased toward the car, which was still running. He crawled along his same trail of lightly trampled grass so slowly and carefully that even Ricky, with dry eyes now, could barely see him. Ricky watched the driver's door, waiting for it to fly open and the crazy man to lunge out and kill Mark. He perched on his toes in a sprinter's stance for a quick getaway through the woods. He saw Mark emerge under the rear bumper, place a hand for balance on the tail light, and slowly ease the hose from the tailpipe. The grass crackled softly and the weeds shook a little and Mark was next to him again, panting and sweating and, oddly, smiling to himself.



They sat on their legs like two insects under the brush, and watched the car.

‘What if he comes out again?’ Ricky asked. ‘What if he sees us?’

‘He can’t see us. But if he starts this way, just follow me. We’ll be gone before he can take a step.’

‘Why don’t we go now?’

Mark stared at him fiercely. ‘I’m trying to save his life, okay? Maybe, just maybe, he’ll see that this is not working, and maybe he’ll decide he should wait or something. Why is that so hard to understand?’

‘Because he’s crazy. If he’ll kill himself, then he’ll kill us. Why is that so hard to understand?’

Mark shook his head in frustration, and suddenly the door opened again. The man rolled out of the car growling and talking to himself, and stomped through the grass to the rear. He grabbed the end of the hose, stared at it as if it just wouldn’t behave, and looked slowly around the small clearing. He was breathing heavily and perspiring. He looked at the trees, and the boys eased to the ground. He looked down, and froze as if he suddenly understood. The grass was slightly trampled around the rear of the car and he knelt as if to inspect it, but then crammed the hose back into the tailpipe instead and hurried back to his door. If someone was watching from the trees, he seemed not to care. He just wanted to hurry up and die.

The two heads rose together above the brush, but just a few inches. They peeked through the weeds for a long minute. Ricky was ready to run, but Mark was thinking.

‘Mark, please, let’s go,’ Ricky pleaded. ‘He almost saw us. What if he’s got a gun or something?’

‘If he had a gun he’d use it on himself.’

Ricky bit his lip and his eyes watered again. He had never won an argument with his brother, and he would not win this one.

Another minute passed, and Mark began to fidget. 'I'll try one more time, okay. And if he doesn't give up, then we'll get outta here. I promise, okay?'

Ricky nodded reluctantly. His brother stretched on his stomach and inched his way through the weeds into the tall grass. Ricky wiped the tears from his cheek with his dirty fingers.

The lawyer's nostrils flared as he inhaled mightily. He exhaled slowly and stared through the windshield while trying to determine if any of the precious, deadly gas had entered his blood and begun its work. A loaded pistol was on the seat next to him. A half-empty fifth of Jack Daniels was in his hand. He took a sip, screwed the cap on it, and placed it on the seat. He inhaled slowly and closed his eyes to savor the gas. Would he simply drift away? Would it hurt or burn or make him sick before it finished him off? The note was on the dash above the steering wheel, next to a bottle of pills.

He cried and talked to himself as he waited for the gas to hurry, dammit! before he'd give up and use the gun. He was a coward, but a very determined one, and he much preferred this sniffing and floating away to sticking a gun in his mouth.

He sipped the whiskey, and hissed as it burned on its descent. Yes, it was finally working. Soon, it would all be over, and he smiled at himself in the mirror because it was working and he was dying and he was not a coward after all. It took guts to do this.

He cried and muttered as he removed the cap of the whiskey bottle for one last swallow. He gulped, and it ran from his lips and trickled into his beard.

He would not be missed. And although this thought should have been painful, the lawyer was calmed by the knowledge that no one would grieve. His mother was the only person in the world who loved him, and she'd been

dead four years so this would not hurt her. There was a child from the first disastrous marriage, a daughter he'd not seen in eleven years, but he'd been told she had joined a cult and was as crazy as her mother.

It would be a small funeral. A few lawyer buddies and perhaps a judge or two would be there all dressed up in dark suits and whispering importantly as the piped-in organ music drifted around the near-empty chapel. No tears. The lawyers would sit and glance at their watches while the minister, a stranger, sped through the standard comments used for dear departed ones who never went to church.

It would be a ten-minute job with no frills. The note on the dash required the body to be cremated.

'Wow,' he said softly as he took another sip. He turned the bottle up, and while gulping glanced in the rearview mirror and saw the weeds move behind the car.

Ricky saw the door open before Mark heard it. It flew open, as if kicked, and suddenly the large, heavy man with the red face was running through the weeds, holding on to the car and growling. Ricky stood, in shock and fear, and wet his pants.

Mark had just touched the bumper when he heard the door. He froze for a second, gave a quick thought to crawling under the car, and the hesitation nailed him. His foot slipped as he tried to stand and run, and the man grabbed him. 'You! You little bastard!' he screamed as he grabbed Mark's hair and flung him on to the trunk of the car. 'You little bastard!' Mark kicked and squirmed, and a fat hand slapped him in the face. He kicked once more, not as violently, and he got slapped again.

Mark stared at the wild, glowing face just inches away. The eyes were red and wet. Fluids dripped from the nose and chin. 'You little bastard,' he growled through clenched, dirty teeth.

When he had him pinned and still and subdued, the lawyer stuck the hose back into the exhaust pipe, then yanked Mark off the trunk by his collar and dragged him through the weeds to the driver's door, which was open. He threw the kid through the door and shoved him across the black leather seat.

Mark was grabbing at the door handle and searching for the door lock switch when the man fell behind the steering wheel. He slammed the door behind him, pointed at the door handle, and screamed, 'Don't touch that!' then he backhanded Mark in the left eye with a vicious slap.

Mark shrieked in pain, grabbed his eyes and bent over, stunned, crying now. His nose hurt like hell and his mouth hurt worse. He was dizzy. He tasted blood. He could hear the man crying and growling. He could smell the whiskey and see the knees of his dirty blue jeans with his right eye. The left was beginning to swell. Things were blurred.

The fat lawyer gulped his whiskey and stared at Mark, who was all bent over and shaking at every joint. 'Stop crying,' he snarled.

Mark licked his lips and swallowed blood. He rubbed the knot above his eye and tried to breathe deeply, still staring at his jeans. Again, the man said, 'Stop crying,' so he tried to stop.

The engine was running. It was a big, heavy, quiet car, but Mark could hear the engine humming very softly somewhere far away. He turned slowly and glanced at the hose winding through the rear window behind the driver like an angry snake sneaking toward them for the kill. The fat man laughed.

'I think we should die together,' he announced, all of a sudden very composed.

Mark's left eye was swelling fast. He turned his shoulders and looked squarely at the man, who was even larger now. His face was chubby, the beard was bushy, the eyes were still red and glowed at him like a demon in the

dark. Mark was crying. 'Please let me out of here,' he said, lip quivering, voice cracking.

The driver stuck the whiskey bottle in his mouth and turned it up. He grimaced and smacked his lips. 'Sorry, kid. You had to be a cute ass, had to stick your dirty little nose into my business, didn't you? So I think we should die together. Okay? Just you and me, pal. Off to La La Land. Off to see the wizard. Sweet dreams, kid.'

Mark sniffed the air, then noticed the pistol lying between them. He glanced away, then stared at it when the man took another drink from the bottle.

'You want the gun?' the man asked.

'No sir.'

'So why are you looking at it?'

'I wasn't.'

'Don't lie to me, kid, because if you do, I'll kill you. I'm crazy as hell, okay, and I'll kill you.' Though tears flowed freely from his eyes, his voice was very calm. He breathed deeply as he spoke. 'And besides, kid, if we're gonna be pals, you've got to be honest with me. Honesty's very important, you know? Now, do you want the gun?'

'No sir.'

'Would you like to pick up the gun and shoot me with it?'

'No sir.'

'I'm not afraid of dying, kid, you understand?'

'Yes sir, but I don't want to die. I take care of my mother and my little brother.'

'Aw, ain't that sweet. A real man of the house.'

He screwed the cap on to the whiskey bottle, then suddenly grabbed the pistol, stuck it deep into his mouth, curled his lips around it, and looked at Mark, who watched every move, hoping he would pull the trigger and hoping he wouldn't. Slowly, he withdrew the barrel from his mouth, kissed the end of it, then pointed it at Mark

'I've never shot this thing, you know,' he said, almost in a whisper. 'Just bought it an hour ago at a pawnshop in

Memphis. Do you think it'll work?'

'Please let me out of here.'

'You have a choice, kid,' he said, inhaling the invisible fumes. 'I'll blow your brains out, and it's over now, or the gas'll get you. Your choice.'

Mark did not look at the pistol. He sniffed the air and thought for an instant that maybe he smelled something. The gun was close to his head. 'Why are you doing this?' he asked.

'None of your damned business, okay, kid. I'm nuts, okay. Over the edge. I planned a nice little private suicide, you know, just me and my hose and maybe a few pills and some whiskey. Nobody looking for me. But, no, you have to get cute. You little bastard!' He lowered the pistol and carefully placed it on the seat. Mark rubbed the knot on his forehead and bit his lip. His hands were shaking and he pressed them between his legs.

'We'll be dead in five minutes,' he announced officially as he raised the bottle to his lips. 'Just you and me, pal, off to see the wizard.'

Ricky finally moved. His teeth chattered and his jeans were wet, but he was thinking now, moving from his crouch on to his hands and knees and sinking into the grass. He crawled toward the car, crying and gritting his teeth as he slid on his stomach. The door was about to fly open. The crazy man, who was large but quick, would leap from nowhere and grab him by the neck, just like Mark, and they'd all die in the long, black car. Slowly, inch by inch, he pushed his way through the weeds.

Mark slowly lifted the pistol with both hands. It was as heavy as a brick. It shook as he raised it and pointed it at the fat man, who leaned toward it until the barrel was an inch from his nose.

‘Now, pull the trigger, kid,’ he said with a smile, his wet face glowing and dancing with delightful anticipation. ‘Pull the trigger, and I’ll be dead and you go free.’ Mark curled a finger around the trigger. The man nodded, then leaned even closer and bit the tip of the barrel with flashing teeth. ‘Pull the trigger!’ he shouted.

Mark closed his eyes and pressed the handle of the gun with the palms of his hands. He held his breath, and was about to squeeze the trigger when the man jerked it from him. He waved it wildly in front of Mark’s face, and pulled the trigger. Mark screamed as the window behind his head cracked into a thousand pieces but did not shatter. ‘It works! It works!’ he yelled as Mark ducked and covered his ears.

Ricky buried his face in the grass when he heard the shot. He was ten feet from the car when something popped and Mark yelled. The fat man was yelling, and Ricky peed on himself again. He closed his eyes and clutched the weeds. His stomach cramped and his heart pounded, and for a minute after the gunshot he did not move. He cried for his brother, who was dead now, shot by a crazy man.

‘Stop crying, dammit! I’m sick of your crying!’

Mark clutched his knees and tried to stop crying. His head pounded and his mouth was dry. He stuck his hands between his knees and bent over. He had to stop crying and think of something. On a television show once some nut was about to jump off a building, and this cool cop just kept talking to him and talking to him, and finally the nut started talking back and of course did not jump. Mark quickly smelled for gas, and asked, ‘Why are you doing this?’

‘Because I want to die,’ the man said calmly.

‘Why?’ he asked again, glancing at the neat, little round hole in his window.

‘Why do kids ask so many questions?’

'Because we're kids. Why do you want to die?' He could barely hear his own words.

'Look, kid, we'll be dead in five minutes, okay? Just you and me, pal, off to see the wizard.' He took a long drink from the bottle, now almost empty. 'I feel the gas, kid. Do you feel it? Finally.'

In the side mirror, through the cracks in the window, Mark saw the weeds move and caught a glimpse of Ricky as he slithered through the weeds and ducked into the bushes near the tree. He closed his eyes and said a prayer.

'I gotta tell you, kid, it's nice having you here. No one wants to die alone. What's your name?'

'Mark.'

'Mark who?'

'Mark Sway.' Keep talking, and maybe the nut won't jump. 'What's your name?'

'Jerome. But you can call me Romey. That's what my friends call me, and since you and I are pretty tight now you can call me Romey. No more questions, okay, kid?'

'Why do you want to die, Romey?'

'I said no more questions. Do you feel the gas, Mark?'

'I don't know.'

'You will soon enough. Better say your prayers.' Romey sank low into the seat with his beefy head straight back and eyes closed, completely at ease. 'We've got about five minutes, Mark, any last words?' The whiskey bottle was in his right hand, the gun in his left.

'Yeah, why are you doing this?' Mark asked, glancing at the mirror for another sign of his brother. He took short, quick breaths through the nose, and neither smelled nor felt anything. Surely Ricky had removed the hose.

'Because I'm crazy, just another crazy lawyer, right. I've been driven crazy, Mark, and how old are you?'

'Eleven.'

'Ever tasted whiskey?'

'No,' Mark answered truthfully.



Suddenly, the whiskey bottle was in his face, and he took it.

‘Take a shot,’ Romey said without opening his eyes.

Mark tried to read the label, but his left eye was virtually closed and his ears were ringing from the gunshot, and he couldn’t concentrate. He sat the bottle on the seat where Romey took it without a word.

‘We’re dying, Mark,’ he said almost to himself. ‘I guess that’s tough at age eleven, but so be it. Nothing I can do about it. Any last words, big boy?’

Mark told himself that Ricky had done the trick, that the hose was now harmless, that his new friend Romey here was drunk and crazy, and that if he survived he would have to do so by thinking and talking. The air was clean. He breathed deeply and told himself that he could make it. ‘What made you crazy?’

Romey thought for a second and decided this was humorous. He snorted and actually chuckled a little. ‘Oh, this is great. Perfect. For weeks now, I’ve known something no one else in the entire world knows, except my client, who’s a real piece of scum, by the way. You see, Mark, lawyers hear all sorts of private stuff that we can never repeat. Strictly confidential, you understand. No way we can ever tell what happened to the money or who’s sleeping with who or where the body’s buried, you follow?’ He inhaled mightily, and exhaled with enormous pleasure. He sank lower in the seat, eyes still closed. ‘Sorry I had to slap you.’ He curled his finger around the trigger.

Mark closed his eyes and felt nothing.

‘How old are you, Mark?’

‘Eleven.’

‘You told me that. Eleven. And I’m forty-four. We’re both too young to die, aren’t we, Mark?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘But it’s happening, pal. Do you feel it?’

‘Yes sir.’

'My client killed a man and hid the body, and now my client wants to kill me. That's the whole story. They've made me crazy. Ha! Ha! This is great, Mark. This is wonderful. I, the trusted lawyer, can now tell you, literally seconds before we float away, where the body is. The body, Mark, the most notorious undiscovered corpse of our time. Unbelievable. I can finally tell!' His eyes were open and glowing down at Mark. 'This is funny as hell, Mark!'

Mark missed the humor. He glanced at the mirror, then at the door lock switch a foot away. The handle was even closer.

Romey relaxed again and closed his eyes as if trying desperately to take a nap. 'I'm sorry about this, kid, really sorry, but, like I said, it's nice to have you here.' He slowly placed the bottle on the dash next to the note and moved the pistol from his left hand to his right, caressing it softly and stroking the trigger with his index finger. Mark tried not to look. 'I'm really sorry about this, kid. How old are you?'

'Eleven. You've asked me three times.'

'Shut up! I feel the gas now, don't you? Quit sniffing, dammit! It's odorless, you little dumbass. You can't smell it. I'd be dead now and you'd be off playing GI Joe if you hadn't been so cute. You're pretty stupid, you know.'

Not as stupid as you, thought Mark. 'Who did your client kill?'

Romey grinned but did not open his eyes. 'A United States Senator. I'm telling. I'm telling. I'm spilling my guts. Do you read newspapers?'

'No.'

'I'm not surprised. Senator Boyette from New Orleans. That's where I'm from.'

'Why did you come to Memphis?'

'Dammit, kid! Full of questions, aren't you?'

'Yeah. Why'd your client kill Senator Boyette?'

‘Why, why, why, who, who, who. You’re a real pain in the ass, Mark.’

‘I know. Why don’t you just let me go?’ Mark glanced at the mirror, then at the hose running into the backseat.

‘I might just shoot you in the head if you don’t shut up.’ His bearded chin dropped and almost touched his chest. ‘My client has killed a lot of people. That’s how he makes money, by killing people. He’s a member of the Mafia in New Orleans, and now he’s trying to kill me. Too bad, ain’t it, kid. We beat him to it. Joke’s on him.’

Romey took a long drink from the bottle and stared at Mark

‘Just think about it, kid, right now, Barry, or Barry The Blade as he’s known, these Mafia guys all have cute nicknames, you know, is waiting for me in a dirty restaurant in New Orleans. He’s probably got a couple of his pals nearby, and after a quiet dinner he’ll want me to get in the car and take a little drive, talk about his case and all, and then he’ll pull out a knife, that’s why they call him The Blade, and I’m history. They’ll dispose of my chubby little body somewhere, just like they did Senator Boyette, and, bam! Just like that, New Orleans has another unsolved murder. But we showed them, didn’t we, kid? We showed them.’

His speech was slower and his tongue thicker. He moved the pistol up and down on his thigh when he talked. The finger stayed on the trigger.

Keep him talking. ‘Why does this Barry guy want to kill you?’

‘Another question. I’m floating. Are you floating?’

‘Yeah. It feels good.’

‘Buncha reasons. Close your eyes, kid. Say your prayers.’ Mark watched the pistol and glanced at the door lock. He slowly touched each fingertip to each thumb, like counting in kindergarten, and the coordination was perfect.

‘So where’s the body?’

Romey snorted and his head nodded. The voice was almost a whisper. 'The body of Boyd Boyette. What a question. First US Senator murdered in office, did you know that? Murdered by my dear client Barry The Blade Muldanno, who shot him in the head four times, then hid the body. No body, no case. Do you understand, kid?'

'Not really.'

'Why aren't you crying, kid? You were crying a few minutes ago. Aren't you scared?'

'Yes, I'm scared. And I'd like to leave. I'm sorry you want to die and all, but I have to take care of my mother.'

'Touching, real touching. Now, shut up. You see, kid, the Feds have to have a body to prove there was a murder. Barry is their suspect, their only suspect, because he really did it, you see, in fact they know he did it. But they need the body.'

'Where is it?'

A dark cloud moved in front of the sun and the clearing was suddenly darker. Romey moved the gun gently along his leg as if to warn Mark against any sudden moves. 'The Blade is not the smartest thug I've ever met, you know. Thinks he's a genius, but he's really quite stupid.'

You're the stupid one, Mark thought again. Sitting in a car with a hose running from the exhaust. He waited as still as could be.

'The body's under my boat.'

'Your boat?'

'Yes, my boat. He was in a hurry. I was out of town, so my beloved client took the body to my house and buried it in fresh concrete under my garage. It's still there, can you believe it? The FBI has dug up half of New Orleans trying to find it, but they've never thought about my house. Maybe Barry ain't so stupid after all.'

'When did he tell you this?'

'I'm sick of your questions, kid.'

'I'd really like to leave now.'

‘Shut up. The gas is working. We’re gone, kid. Gone.’ He dropped the pistol on the seat.

The engine hummed quietly. Mark glanced at the bullet hole in the window, at the millions of tiny crooked cracks running from it, then at the red face and heavy eyelids. A quick snort, almost a snore, and the head nodded downward.

He was passing out! Mark stared at him and watched his thick chest move. He’d seen his ex-father do this a hundred times.

Mark breathed deeply. The door lock would make noise. The gun was too close to Romey’s hand. Mark’s stomach cramped and his feet were numb.

The red face emitted a loud, sluggish noise, and Mark knew there would be no more chances. Slowly, ever so slowly, he inched his shaking finger to the door lock switch.

\* \* \*

Ricky’s eyes were almost as dry as his mouth, but his jeans were soaked. He was under the tree, in the darkness, away from the bushes and the tall grass and the car. Five minutes had passed since he had removed the hose. Five minutes since the gunshot. But he knew his brother was alive because he had darted behind trees for fifty feet until he caught a glimpse of the blond head sitting low and moving about in the huge car. So he stopped crying, and started praying.

He made his way back to the log, and as he crouched low and stared at the car and ached for his brother, the passenger door suddenly flew open, and there was Mark.

Romey’s chin dropped on to his chest, and just as he began his next snore Mark slapped the pistol on to the floor with his left hand while unlocking the door with his right. He yanked the handle and rammed his shoulder into the door,

and the last thing he heard as he rolled out was another deep snore from the lawyer.

He landed on his knees and grabbed at the weeds as he scratched and clawed his way from the car. He raced low through the grass and within seconds made it to the tree where Ricky watched in muted horror. He stopped at the stump and turned, expecting to see the lawyer lumbering after him with the gun. But the car appeared harmless. The passenger door was open. The engine was running. The exhaust pipe was free of devices. He breathed for the first time in a minute, then slowly looked at Ricky.

'I pulled the hose out,' Ricky said in a shrill voice between rapid breaths. Mark nodded but said nothing. He was suddenly much calmer. The car was fifty feet away, and if Romey emerged, they could disappear through the woods in an instant. And hidden by the tree and the cover of the brush, they would never be seen by Romey if he decided to jump out and start blasting away with the gun.

'I'm scared, Mark. Let's go,' Ricky said, his voice still shrill, his hands shaking.

'Just a minute.' Mark studied the car intently.

'Come on, Mark. Let's go.'

'I said just a minute.'

Ricky watched the car. 'Is he dead?'

'I don't think so.'

So the man was alive, and had the gun, and it was becoming obvious that his big brother was no longer scared and was thinking of something. Ricky took a step backward. 'I'm leaving,' he mumbled. 'I want to go home.'

Mark did not move. He exhaled calmly and studied the car. 'Just a second,' he said without looking at Ricky. The voice had authority again.

Ricky grew still and leaned forward, placing both hands on both wet knees. He watched his brother, and shook his head slowly as Mark carefully picked a cigarette from his shirt pocket while staring at the car. He lit it, took a long