Sycamore
Row

Also by John Grisham

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Non-fiction
The Innocent Man

John Grisham

Sycamore Row

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1

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To Renée

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1

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

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

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

Had there been an instant of doubt, of second-guessing? When his feet left the safety of the ladder, but with his hands still free, had Seth instinctively grabbed the rope above his head and fought desperately until he surrendered? No one would ever know, but it looked doubtful. Later evidence would reveal that Seth had been a man on a mission.

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

His suicide would not help matters.

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

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

The bridge was nothing more than a wooden platform spanning a nameless, narrow creek choked with kudzu and crawling with cottonmouths. For months, Mr. Hubbard had been planning to replace it with a large concrete culvert, but his bad health had sidetracked him. It was near a clearing where two dilapidated shacks rotted in the brush and overgrowth and offered the only hint that there was once a small settlement there.

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

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

"Yes sir."

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

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

Two deputies arrived in the same car half an hour later, and as they were putting on rain slickers an ambulance arrived with a crew of three. From the gravel road, they all strained to see the old sycamore, but after a few seconds of focusing it was apparent there was a man hanging from it. Calvin told them everything he knew. The deputies decided it was best to proceed as if a crime had been committed, and they prohibited the ambulance crew from approaching the scene. Another deputy arrived, then another. They searched the car and found nothing helpful. They photographed and videoed Seth hanging with his eyes closed and his head twisted grotesquely to his right. They studied the tracks around the sycamore and found no evidence of anyone else being present. One deputy took Calvin to Mr. Hubbard's home a few miles away—the boy rode in the backseat, still mute. The doors were unlocked, and on the kitchen table they found a note on a yellow legal pad. Seth had printed neatly: "To Calvin. Please inform the authorities I've taken my own life, with no help from anyone. On the

attached sheet of paper I have left specific instructions for my funeral and burial. No autopsy! S.H." It was dated that day, Sunday, October 2, 1988.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm not so sure about this."

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

"Probably."

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

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

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

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

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

way to the ambulance. Ozzie followed the little procession, as confused as anyone.

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

Good old Seth. Who, exactly, was Ozzie supposed to call now? He knew Seth was divorced but did not know if he had remarried. He knew nothing about his family. Seth was about seventy. If he had adult children, where were they?

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