



J.D.'s young chief deputy who was killed last year, shot in the head by a robbery suspect.

"When Baxter got killed I wasn't more than a mile and a half away." Phil Summers and I are back on patrol, looking for a local man who has jumped an appeal bond on a murder conviction. "I had it in the wind, goin' to hell, but he was dead when I got there."

We get another call. Summers "puts it in the wind" again over a twisty country road to check out a reported burglary. "We're doin' 85 now. A regular car would be a real handful here."

We find the suspect in a trailer park, a teen-aged boy whose guilt is corroborated by an eyewitness and by a bloodhound (I told you it was like a movie), who traces the burglar's trail to the door of the boy's mobile home. We question two small boys, who confirm having seen the suspect run from the direction of the burgled house.

"Kids and whores," Summers explains. "At the police academy they tell you they're the best people to get information out of. Women notice clothes, and kids notice cars. And whores, well, you know men. They get a little love and they'll tell a woman anything. And whores are out on the street all the time, so they see a lot."

Leaving the trailer park, Summers stops to wait for a passing truck. "We have a lot of trouble with parks like this. They've got a lot of transients, real ruby-jeweled people."

Near town, we catch up with Deputy Howell's car. I notice the muffler hanging low and ask Summers about ground clearance. "We haven't drug the mufflers off of but only one car, and that was the sheriff's. He'll go anywhere."

"And I'll bet you're going to tell me he's got the fastest car, too."

"Oh, he surely does," Summers grins. "He wouldn't put his ass in anything that wouldn't flat fly."

The next day, I put the same question to J.D. himself. "Hell, they'll tell you anything," he chuckles. "Whatever car I get in, they'll swear it's the fastest." We're cruising up old U.S. 41, which was the main route to Florida before I-75. I'm feeling a slight attack of nostalgia, realizing it must have been this highway I cruised with my parents on the way to Daytona in a '48 Buick convertible. "It was a lot different back then," the sheriff muses. "A lot of businesses went down overnight when they put through the Interstate." We pass a half-collapsed wooden building plastered with graffiti, rusted Coca-Cola

signs ("The Pause That Refreshes"), and an outstanding collection of chrome hubcaps. "That was once the biggest truck stop in the South." The road dips sharply to the right, then climbs a long hill. At the crest of it there's a billboard advertising a marina ("Big Toys for Big Boys"), and as we drop down into a hollow, J.D. points out the foundation of what was once a fireworks store. "That's where I was sittin' the night ole Junior came by. He was pissed off 'cause his car didn't run good. That was over at Boyd Speedway, just over that hill there. So he drove it right off the track and headed for home, over on the East Ridge. I was just pulled off to the side there in my '64 GTO, and Junior come by turnin' it on. It must've been about midnight, and I chased him all the way to his home in Tennessee. Course he was geared too low to really get it on for the road, but he took out a slew of mailboxes on the way. I wrote him up a ticket, right there in his driveway, and told him to stop by and see the judge when he got a chance."

Toward evening, before J.D. takes Humphrey and me, along with Mrs. Stewart and June Bug, to his favorite steakhouse in Chattanooga, we make one last stop on our tour of the county: Stewart's Funeral Home. It's a brand-new building and the sheriff's pride and joy. We see the chapel, the office, the reception rooms, and we're about to head for Chattanooga, but there's one more thing. "Let me show you where we fix 'em up." Humphrey and I take deep breaths and glance at each other before we step through the door at the back of the office. The floor and walls are covered in white tile, and it looks something like an operating room, except that instead of there being stethoscopes and scalpels on the counter adjacent to the table, it's covered with make-up, hair spray, and flesh-colored putty. I ask J.D. if he's a mortician. "No, I ain't licensed, but I could do it. It's pretty simple. You could do it yourself if you just watched a few times."

I glance at Humphrey and he looks a little faint. We step into the display room, and J.D. shows us his selection of caskets. "Here, feel this." He strokes a pillow in one of the boxes. "That's real hand-tufted material, more comfortable than a bed. Course it should be," he winks. "You'd be in it for a long snooze."