

CHAPTER ONE

A triple play! Young Joshua Craig was still reliving the game-ending ankle-high line drive that he snapped from his shortstop position before stepping on second base to force out Bobby Jenkins who was off the bag, then drilling the ball to Jimmy Thomas at first base to catch Stevie Fowler before he could get back.

This was euphoria. He thought of the word in his 6th-grade English test Mrs. Green gave the class just yesterday. E-u-p-h-o-r-i-a. He couldn't wait to tell Dad and Mom about it—moment by moment. His anticipation of the hit, his instinctive step toward second, his—Whoa! What was that?

Something suddenly grabbed his attention, something odd, something out of place. But what? He squinted and looked up to the top of Henhawk Hill. There was a light up there and not just any old light—not a little lamp or lantern. A blaze!

For several minutes Joshua stood transfixed, feet planted like in a pot of clay. Overwhelming curiosity paralyzed the thought of continuing on home. Dusk darkened into twilight and, as the rising moon painted yellow hues on the tree branches, Joshua could see more clearly.

It was a bonfire, and in its midst was a huge wooden cross. He could almost hear the flames crackle and what they lit up? A chill flickered down his spine. A circle of white-cloaked, hooded figures moved around the cross, rhythmically lifting their arms toward the sky, then lowering them. There were probably a couple dozen or so people.

A booming voice carried down from the hilltop in phrases muffled by the distance. And as if a bucket of kerosene had been tossed on it, the cross flashed into a flaming ball, scorching the air. The blaze seemed to heighten the motions of the hooded figures.

Just then a scream pierced the air. A shiver of fright flew up Joshua's back. He tried to turn to run, but his feet felt like balls of lead, heavier than the double harness for Dad's oxen. Worse still, he couldn't remove his eyes from the scene above.

At that moment the figures stopped and huddled around the cross. It felt like minutes passed by. The night noises of crickets and katydids had fallen silent since the scream. The faint smell of smoke reached Joshua's nostrils. Its bitterness stung his tongue.

The flame began to wane and the figures moved en masse away from the cross. Suddenly most of the ghouls in the congregation dispersed down the northeast side of the hill to Joshua's right. Again, he tried to move. Again, he couldn't. His feet were heavy blocks of lumber. A drop of sweat began to crawl from his temple down his cheek.

One small group remained behind, tightly knit as if its members were sharing a secret. Six were in the band, five wearing white robes. The sixth, draped in what appeared to be a red robe—though it was hard to be sure from this distance—towered over the others. It bent to the ground and picked up something—something shaped like ... like a bedroll perhaps. Then, two of the figures stepped to the front and two moved behind the bedroll, grabbed it and held it in the air at hip height, while the large figure and one of the others lifted lanterns to shoulder height and stepped off away from the burning cross.

The clutch moved with apparent urgency down the hill, never stopping, on a route between trees and underbrush. When they reached the steepest terrain the four figures carrying the bundle turned as on an axis so that they were at the same level, then continued on their way until they were just about thirty yards or so from Joshua, the distance from home plate to first base.

The boy trembled. It had seemed that he had been watching a story unfold in a picture book. It took several long moments for reality to register with him. But when the point struck, it did so with certainty, suddenness and fright: They were coming directly toward him!

Joshua's heart raced.

Now they were only fifteen or twenty yards away, still heading toward the very spot on which he was standing.

Joshua again struggled to move his feet, willing them take that one motion that would free him to run. He could steal second base, even third, so why couldn't he move this moment when his life could be in danger?

Now the two figures in front were ten yards away and the light from their lanterns drew ever closer, now just feet away from the boy.

Icy fingers played taps on his nerves. Finally, the reality of their closeness struck him like a right cross, and that blow sent him reeling backwards, propelled down the narrow, winding path that led to the road about a quarter of a mile from his home.

In the last minute or two, darkness had descended on this east side of Henhawk Hill, but Joshua knew the path well and darted around its bends. Tree roots and jutting rocks—dark shades in a world of gray—loomed up at him, but he bounded over and around them. When he reached a small field near the road he stopped momentarily, to look behind him. Light from the lanterns bobbed along through the trees.

He bent at the waist and inhaled deeply but it felt like his head was in a box, like all the oxygen in the woods had been sucked up by some inhuman monster of some sort. He stood straight and tried again. This time it worked. With relief, he absorbed the fresh air of the cooling night, then walked briskly down the road. A jumble of thoughts flooded his mind.

Suddenly male voices erupted and horses came around a bend in the road. Joshua jumped into bushes and hunkered down, just then noticing that he held his baseball glove in a vice grip. The men were speaking all at once, but in secretive tones. Not boisterous and jocular like you'd expect from such a large group. Not a single laugh. Not a chuckle. Not a "Glad to see you tonight, Chuck" ... "You, too, Roger."

Probably a couple of dozen horses passed by. A horsefly buzzed Joshua's head and he bit a lip trying to keep from swatting it. When they'd gone, he counted to ten and stepped out. Just then a large dark horse almost ran into him. He leaped away and fell to the ground.

He blinked and looked up at a stallion that was darker than the night, towering over him. Its nostrils flared. He gulped and tried to catch his breath. He thought the face under the hood was Danny Farmer's dad but wasn't sure.

Then the rider's big fist stretched out from the white cloak and pointed an extraordinarily long, bony finger at him. Joshua looked away.

"Boy!" the man's voice boomed, "you saw nothin' here tonight, right? Nothin'!" Yep, it could be Mister Farmer, but Joshua wasn't sure. One thing he was sure of: it was a scary voice and not one to argue with. He recalled Danny sometimes coming to school all banged up and the talk around school that Mrs. Farmer sometimes sported similar bruises. Nobody's house had that many doors to run into, not even Doc Walker.

He gulped hard and murmured a "yes-sir."

"You say a word, your daddy and mommy get hurt, boy."

That shook Joshua down to his toes. The threat in the voice was easy to believe. At the moment Joshua just hoped that big horse didn't stomp on him.

"You hear?!"

Joshua whimpered and nodded his head.

“Git off with ya’, then.”

Joshua made sure he still gripped his baseball glove, pulled his cap down over his ears and sprinted as fast as he could in the heavy dusk.

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Joshua didn’t say a word that sleepless night, Sunday, nor the next day, Monday, nor even the next. He loved his Mom. He adored his Dad. The best ever.

He went to school Monday and Tuesday, yipped it up with the guys when the last bell rang at 2:30 Tuesday, planned with Bobby Spillman to go fishing after school Thursday, figured with the gang that they’d be playing pickup games all the time, like every day, when the school year ended Friday. But that night he couldn’t sleep again. He wondered what was the world’s record for not sleeping. He knew Mom would figure something was wrong. Maybe even tonight she’d corner him and ask him and not be satisfied and ask him again, all the time saying, “Joshua, you’re not sleeping are you?” And “What’s going on?” And finally he’d succumb (s-u-c-c-u-m-b) and tell her.

So that third day Joshua summoned the courage to return to Henhawk Hill. Maybe it was because some bully on a horse thought he could boss him ’round and scare him. Maybe it was because he knew his Dad was broad and strong and could whoop anyone alive, big white cloak on a big black horse or not. Maybe because these woods always held a serenity for him that he didn’t want to lose forever. Heck, even the poets Mrs. Morris made the class read talked about Maine’s forests, their beauty, watching nature, feeling its power, its magnificence, its creativity. Well, he didn’t know about

any of that fancy stuff, just that it was his playground and it weren't for anybody else to steal it from him. The other night might have broken that sense of perfection, but Joshua wanted it back. Bad.

And maybe it was because Pastor Nathan had preached Sunday about David and Goliath, the boy and the giant, facing fear when you know God's on your side, knowin' He's your protector and He has an awesome right hand. Well, it was probably all of those things, though Joshua didn't sit around and analyze himself. It was time to be strong. Heck, it was time to get some sleep!

He knew this for sure: he was twelve years old now—old enough to help build Dad's new barn, old enough to steer a horse while it tilled a field (well, re-tilled anyhow) and he wanted to deal with this thing himself, then present the facts calmly to Dad and Mom. Before she harangued (h-a-r-a-n-g— oh, darn) him into submission.

He almost laughed in spite of himself. Plus today was different. First, it was noontime, though the sun was behind clouds. Second, no cross was burning. Third, standin' steadfast at his side was Moe, his big German shepherd, his assurance, his sidekick against fear.

Joshua was skipping the lunch hour at school, but that was a small sacrifice. Heck, in the springtime no one's head's into learnin' anyhow. Mom called it “spring fever.” Joshua simply called it “boredom.” And besides, it was hot for spring—Dad said it was the hottest he remembered—and it was stiflin' in that schoolroom.

So here he was, feet planted in the exact spot he stood those two nights before. He'd found his footprints, molded into the spring-dampened earth. He looked up through the branches toward the place where the cross had burned.

He turned to walk back down the hill, following his trajectory from the other night. He grabbed a dead branch off the ground and began swinging it like a baseball bat as they descended. A minute later, Moe veered off the path and dashed right into a thicket of brush and alders. Joshua tugged at his

overalls, pulled the strap up onto his right shoulder, and walked toward the thicket. As he got nearer he poked the dead branch at a bush in front of him and called, “Moe.”

The dog growled—low, intimidating. Joshua couldn’t see him through the dense bushes.

Again, “Moe.” No response. No Moe bounding out, knocking him to the ground and slobbering all over his face. But there was a sound. Joshua tilted his head and listened. Moe was diggin’ at the ground.

Joshua tossed the branch aside, approached the thicket and peered in, squinting to see in the darkness. Yep, there he was.

“Here, boy!” he called.

Joshua always told his friends Moe was the most obedient dog in The Crossing. Heck, the world. Now he doubted that. Not today anyhow.

Exasperated, he decided he’d find out close-up what was distracting his dog. He took a step back, readied himself and lunged through the outer crop of branches, driving his legs forward with a burst of strength into the midst of the undergrowth. As he plowed through, there was a blur of branches and boughs, then a startled Moe turning to look up at him just before he fell face-first to the ground at the big dog’s side.

Joshua lay face down and caught his breath. He squeezed his fingers into a layer of winter-old moldy leaves covering the earth. Boy, Mom’d make him take a bath tonight, that was for sure. Suddenly, a putrid smell assaulted him. He jerked up onto his knees, and yelled, “Ugh-h. Yuch! Let me outta here!”

He looked down to where his left hand had dug into the leaves. Half a red bandanna stuck out of the ground. He looked a foot to the right, where Moe’d been digging. Reaching out of the earth, as if to grasp the sky, was a hand, its fingers gnarled and gory, caked with mud and dried blood.

Joshua screamed, screamed again, and again. Freezing shivers bristled his back and sent a shudder the length of his body. With one quick motion, he jumped to his feet, then turned, closed his eyes and dove out through the thicket, landing on his back. A wave of nausea swept over him, and he vomited and vomited until his ribs hurt beyond pain and it seemed he'd voided his entire body. Moe whined at his side, and when Joshua looked at him, Moe slobbered a big lick on his cheek.