

ONE  
DARK  
SUMMER

BRUCE WHITLEY

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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this book to my wife, Connie, who has offered her encouragement and support more times than I can remember, and to my sons who helped me through vexing times on the computer.

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# PROLOGUE

Joe blinked then opened his eyes. It had been another sultry night and a line of sweat trickled down his temple. He lay atop the sheets on his bed dressed in his underwear. It was early dawn and he saw the pale light breaking through the spinning blades of the window fan. The monotonous whir of the fan nearly put him back to sleep. Then he heard the distant whistle of the approaching train. The *City of New Orleans* was on time and was racing southward out of Chicago. Soon, it would pass along the border of the bean field that abutted his backyard.

Joe's hometown of Jasonville in southern Illinois would be nothing but a blur to those drowsy passengers still awake when the train sped through the only gated crossing in town.

He took a moment to survey his small bedroom. The venetian blinds were drawn over the second window and a small dresser sat across the room. The sliding doors stood open to his meager closet. The hardwood floors were the only cool spot in the room. Joe loved the early morning. It reminded him of being in the woods hunting squirrels.

He heard the rustle of the sheets and the squeak of the mattress as his mother got out of bed. He listened to her

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footsteps as she headed for the kitchen. Before long, the scent of bacon and eggs wafted throughout the tiny house.

As he pulled on his faded Levis, T-shirt, and well-worn All Star high-tops, he wondered what the day would hold. The possibilities for a fifteen-year-old and his buddies were endless.

# CHAPTER

# 1

“No!” Joe said, clenching his teeth.

He turned and bolted for the cover of the woods. His instincts guided him as he ran for his life. He bounded over fallen trees, dodged stumps and roots, and scrambled past countless saplings. Low limbs and branches shook violently as he slapped and parted them with his free hand. In his other hand he gripped his 20-gauge shotgun tightly. The forest floor was littered with leaves and dead twigs that rustled and snapped with every stride. Crows, blue jays, and chickadees added to the chaos with their calls and cries of alarm, startled by the quickness with which their pristine calm had been so terribly disturbed.

Recoiling branches painfully whacked his face, and briars bit and scratched his exposed skin. His shirt and body became wet with sweat mixed with trickles of blood. These obstacles did not hinder his flight, and he pressed on deeper and deeper into the woods.

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What was that? Stealing a quick glance behind, Joe could see movement. Were the movement of branches and the noise of rustling leaves his doing, or, as he feared, was he being followed? The question bore through his chest like a hot poker.

“Here, here in Jasonville, a tiny spot on the map in the heart of farming country. This is not happening,” Joe thought.

Joe was an excellent squirrel hunter and was at home in the woods, but, if it came to it, would he be too exhausted to confront a foe bent on harming him? Racing ahead, he prayed that his pursuer would be the first to tire.

Joe could feel the pulse and hear the whoosh of blood as his heart pounded against his chest. He slogged through puddles, his feet squishing in his wet shoes. The heat and humidity of the late summer afternoon made each breath agonizing. His legs and chest ached. Joe’s shoes became slick, and he began to struggle to keep his balance.

Without warning, his right foot failed to catch hold, and he came crashing to the ground. He tumbled head over heels before finally landing at the base of a giant oak. His shotgun flew out of his hand and twirled around in midair. It came to rest, partially enveloped in mud, at the edge of a meandering creek.

Scared stiff, Joe’s eyes moved side to side. He felt the earth with his left hand; beneath his right was the rough surface of a gnarled root. It seemed as if everything stood still for a heartbeat, the only sound his labored breathing. He feared it would betray his position.

Seconds passed, yet he lingered, crouching low on all fours. He strained to hear any sound of movement. He began to grow more comfortable, his breathing slowed and his muscles rejuvenated. For an instant, all seemed quiet.



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Suddenly, there was the crack of a breaking limb followed by the rustle of leaves. Had something or someone fallen out of a tree? Joe wasn't sure how far the sound had traveled. His muscles responded with a nervous twitching, and the hairs on the back of his arms and neck stood at attention. Again, he made a sweep of the area but sensed nothing out of order.

After regaining some of his courage, he slowly stood up and began to move ahead. Picking up his gun, he searched for a crossing. Not far to his left a fallen elm spanned the creek forming a natural bridge.

Using a technique learned from his grandpa, Joe crossed the creek with little difficulty. He scrambled up the opposite bank, grappling with roots and vines for support. Reaching the top, Joe was exhausted. He had to find a safe place to rest, while remaining undiscovered.

An opening at the base of an old elm caught Joe's eye. He was thankful to find that inside the old sentinel a hollowed-out area extended several feet upward.

Quickly, he gathered a few stout branches and climbed into the cavity. He constructed a crude ladder by wedging branches inside the tree. Joe climbed as far into the old tree as possible. His head rested just behind a smooth round hole about two inches in diameter. This, the abandoned work of a lone woodpecker, became his link to the outside world.

Exhausted and scared, he needed to rest and regain his strength. In spite of the heat and cramped confines of his hideout, his eyelids grew heavy. A draft of cool air blew inward directly across his brow, and he slipped into an uneasy slumber.

# CHAPTER

# 2

“Hey, Joe, grab that Louisville Slugger and an extra glove,” Rolle called out. He was sitting just outside the garage.

“Ok. Ok. I don’t need a reminder,” Joe noted.

Today would be a scorcher by any standards. The temperature was in the eighties and the humidity was so high that moisture collected on anything and anybody. Joe rummaged through the garage in search of a boxful of retired baseballs and gloves. He knew the box was there because he distinctly remembered cramming it full of leftovers a few seasons back. That particular summer Joe’s dad had decided he needed to reclaim the garage for his car. The old Ford Galaxy had been destined to spend a couple winters outside due to lack of space and his dad had had enough. It had taken hours dragging old trunks, broken lawn mowers and bicycles, and piles and piles of boxed up junk, down to the curb.

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The collector of junk for the Village of Jasonville was good ole Perry. He would drop by at his convenience in his dilapidated Chevy pickup and sort it out. All things were destined for one of two places: the county dump or Perry's yard.

Joe wasn't certain of Perry's origin, though some thought he was from out east. He had an accent. None of the townspeople had actually been to the eastern U.S. but television and radio had described natives to that region so their theory was plausible. Perry was a burly guy with an angular face and thick black hair. The boys had more than once caught a glimpse of a partially hidden tattoo on his right arm. He was married to a matronly woman missing several teeth and had a boy a bit younger than Joe. The family really didn't mind the good-natured ribbing they took at the expense of living in a junkyard and thus led a peaceful, happy existence.

"Hell, Joe! We ain't got all day. What are you doin' sittin' on that box?" Rolle blurted.

Joe was startled from his daydream about Perry. He resumed his search for the box.

"Bingo, Rolle," Joe said with relief, "I think I see it over in the corner. Get over here and give me a hand."

The boys carried the box outside the garage to have a look. The first thing they admired when they opened it were two baseball cards. Stan the Man and Bob Gibson were a couple of their favorite St. Louis Cardinals.

"Wow! There's some cool stuff in here," Joe exclaimed.

Picking out a worn leather glove, he turned it over for closer inspection. Some stitching had begun to unravel but it would still be able to scoop a well-hit ground ball. There were plenty of old balls, too.

Satisfied, the boys quickly repackaged their supplies. They hopped on their bikes and sped down the driveway. Their

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destination this hot summer day was the vacant lot on the other side of town. The lot was the closest thing to a baseball diamond the kids had. The owner had turned it over to the town's avid fans some time ago and kept the grass green and mown short.

The town's roads were composed of grated dirt and covered with a coating of sticky black oil. On top of that was a layer of gravel that, for the most part, was packed tightly by traffic. It was a bit bumpy, though, and there were occasional pockets of loose gravel that posed hazards to anyone careening down the narrow streets on a bicycle. The boys were masters of dodging these hazards and used outstretched legs to speed around the corners.

"Get a load of this, Joe," Rolle exclaimed proudly as he demonstrated his skill of rapid peddling with no hands on the handlebars.

"Damn, I'm flying," Rolle continued as his hair flapped in the wind.

He flew by the banks of honeysuckle vines. The honeysuckle was in full bloom and its sweet signature aroma was everywhere. Though the smell was delightful, it was no secret that areas covered with this vine should command respect. Not only were they pleasant for passersby, but they also were a life-giving source of nectar and pollen to a myriad of bees. Today, the vines were alive with the dipping and darting of countless workers, toiling incessantly to collect their rewards.

"Joe, you think we got a chance today?" Rolle yelled above the wind noise.

"Chance for what?" replied Joe.

"Hell, you know. Can we beat those guys?" Rolle said tensely.

"Well, if Harold throws straight and Bobby doesn't allow pass balls behind the plate, I think we can do it," Joe said. "You

and I are good in the field and at bat. Dad's help with batting practice has been a plus, too."

"I think Tommy would just shit if we beat 'em today," Rolle said with a sly grin.

In this instant of bravado, Rolle encountered one of those loose pockets of gravel. His handlebars abruptly rotated 90 degrees. He catapulted over the front of his bike and landed half way up the bank, smack in the middle of the honeysuckle.

"Jesus Christ!" Rolle screamed in dismay. "Look at this! You gotta' be kiddin' me!"

Rolle was thankful that the vines cushioned his fall and likely prevented nasty scrapes and bruises. But he quickly realized there was another problem. Bees. Their intense buzzing grew by the second. Rolle's eyes glanced in every direction and, for an instant, his muscles were frozen.

By this time Joe had turned around and come to find out what happened.

"Rolle, you OK?" Joe called out. "Can you move? Anything broken? Holy crap! That was some crash!"

Something must have clicked at that moment. Rolle sprang from his resting place among the aromatic blossoms like a shot from a cannon. He dashed across the road and turned around half expecting something to grab him. To his relief, the stinging insects hadn't felt threatened by what had occurred. The bees were rather dazed and continued to mill around without specific purpose.

Both Joe and Rolle drummed up the courage to scurry back and forth across the street to retrieve the spilled contents of the box that had tumbled along with Rolle.

"If I get stung by one of those bees I'll kick your ass for being so stupid," Joe said emphatically.

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Joe had a particular aversion to the fuzzy black and white bumblebees. After all, he had inadvertently stepped in a nest of the devils one day while on a hunting trip.

“Jesus, we’re finally done!” Joe said as he placed the last baseball back in the box with the rest of the stuff.

“Well, thanks for the concern pal,” Rolle stated with a hint of sarcasm.

“If you hadn’t been playing Evil Knieval, we’d be taking infield by now,” Joe replied quickly.

“Anyway, I can’t believe our luck,” Rolle said. “No stings. This must be our day. Sure more than I could hope for. One or two bent spokes and a small dent in the fender.”

Rolle straddled his front wheel and wrenched his handlebars back to center. It was only a short ride now to the diamond.

# CHAPTER

# 3

Jasonville was nestled among rich farmland and woodlands in the southern part of Illinois, about sixty miles southeast of St. Louis. The prevailing terrain was gently rolling hills. Most of the streets were oil based and dusted with pea gravel. The main street through town was recently blacktopped.

At the start of summer every year, the road graders and oil trucks would converge on the town. The work crews were a dirty bunch, but, after all, it was a hot, nasty job. As the roads were repaired and the oil applied, a small sign was attached in the middle of a hemp rope that spanned the road. It read simply, “Road Closed.” The oil cured in about a week and the road opened for regular travel. The roads leading out of town simply received a cover of sawdust.

Riding through town was pleasant enough. Houses were mostly small but the upkeep depended upon the owner. One intersection displayed this perfectly.

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On one corner was a small white house trimmed with tall windows, black shutters and a picturesque front porch. The porch was large enough for a swing and birds nested in the angle of one of the white columns that supported the roof. Mrs. Lawrence, the elderly widow who lived there, was cordial and knew Joe well. He mowed the lawn while she tended to her flower gardens. The deep purple irises and the bright orange and yellow gladiolas were breathtaking. Blood-red roses climbed a latticework of trellises. Beds of rhododendrons, lilacs and hydrangeas contributed to the beauty of the gardens at different times during the summer. A low white picket fence surrounded the property. Joe thought a lot of Mrs. Lawrence, although trimming around the fence was tough. She always offered him a cool glass of lemonade and a large piece of peach cobbler upon completion of his work.

Ole Ed's house stood just next door. Ed had been a bachelor all his life. He was good hearted and would give you the shirt off his back, but didn't care that his yard contained more species of grasses than a prairie nature reserve. His vegetables, however, were the envy of the town. It was not uncommon to see townsfolk talking to Ed while he worked his vegetable garden. He would pause, remove his broad-brimmed hat, and wipe his brow with his handkerchief. If you were lucky, something was ready to harvest. He shared his award-winning produce with everyone.

There was an abundance of large trees scattered throughout the town. It was difficult to imagine the ages of the stately oaks and towering elms. In some areas, their roots had pushed and cracked sidewalks, leaving behind distorted, angled pieces of concrete. You had to pay close attention when traversing these undulating walkways.

All in all, it was a comfortable place, especially for a kid. The pulse of the town was slow and things pretty much mulled along. What else could be expected of a town with a population of four hundred, including cats, dogs, and cows?



# CHAPTER

# 4

Something wasn't right. He was asleep but he sensed something pulsing against his cheek. As his level of consciousness rose, he blinked open his right eye. A cool drop of water ricocheted off the knothole and landed there. Joe jerked his head and instantly was fully awake, remembering that he was inside the hollowed-out tree. He could hear the raindrops falling through leaves and splattering against its trunk. He realized he'd successfully evaded his pursuer.

Joe raised his hand and wiped the moisture from his face. He wiggled and turned just enough to peer through the knothole. There was nothing but total darkness. He pressed his face against the tree and strained his eye trying to catch a glimpse of something, anything. His efforts were futile.

Joe hadn't any reason to fear the dark in the past, but this was different. His mind began to speculate—and that was bad. How long had he been here? There had been daylight

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and clear skies when he arrived. A summer storm must have developed and darkness now enveloped the woods.

A pang of hunger rose from the pit of his stomach. He suppressed it as a myriad of other thoughts raced around in his head. His eye remained fixed straight ahead, even though it seemed hopeless that he would see anything in the darkness.

“What was that?” Joe thought, his heart quickened, pounding in his chest while a lump formed in his throat. Yet, there was nothing. The rain tapered to a mere sprinkle then stopped. The absence of sound was eerie. The stillness began to overwhelm him.

“Oh no!” he whispered. There was no question that he saw something this time—a pinpoint orange glow that quickly intensified then faded and disappeared. It couldn’t have been more than a few yards away, at the extreme periphery of his field of vision. As hard as he tried, Joe couldn’t see any farther to his right. His mind began to scramble for explanations.

Could the glow be the mysterious lights he had witnessed while hunting coons with his grandpa? Decomposing organic matter in the swamp could form methane gas, creating a glow that floated above the swamp. But there was no swamp here.

There was only one other time he could remember seeing something similar.

Joe, Rolle, Rolle’s older brother, Jim, and a couple other friends had decided to take in a movie. All the boys were good kids, but some would take more risks than the others. Jim had been known for drinking beer and Rolle had tried it as well.

Rolle called Joe early that particular evening to ask if he wanted to go to the drive-in with some friends.

“Hey, Joe. What are you doin’ tonight?” Rolle asked. “Want to go to the drive-in?”

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“Sure, I got nothing planned. Just got back from Wilson’s pond. Fishing with grandpa,” Joe replied.

“Good, that settles it. Jim says we might see boobs in this one. Don’t tell your dad! Jim’s drivin’. See ya’ ’bout seven,” Rolle said.

Jim and the guys came a little earlier than seven. Joe and his dad were in the front yard under the trees, sitting in a couple of cheap aluminum lawn chairs, discussing Joe’s fishing trip.

Joe’s dad was forty-years old and had been a teacher in the local high school for years. Lyle Taylor was someone who knew right from wrong and would help anyone in need. Together with his wife, Martha, they had raised a fine son. Lyle was well respected.

Rolle popped out of the car and said, “Hey, Mr. Taylor, keepin’ up with the Cardinals? Walked all over the Giants last night, huh?” He knew Lyle and Joe listened to nearly all the games on the radio.

“You bet they did. By the way, how’s the batting coming along?” Lyle replied. Lyle had been throwing batting practice to the two boys. He still chuckled to himself as he recalled brushing the young hitters away from home plate with his famous curve balls.

“Isn’t it ’bout time to clean out the garage again, Mr. Taylor?” Rolle ribbed. He remembered the last fiasco but knew stuff never stopped accumulating.

“Now, just a minute, boy,” Lyle replied. “I’ll have you know, I wanted to start next week but Perry informed me he had run out of space in his yard for all my junk. Anyway, Joe tells me you guys are off to a movie. Be careful, now.”

“You gave Joe extra money to buy us somethin’ to eat, right?” Rolle asked. With that last lighthearted jab, the boys walked toward the car.

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The guys loaded up and backed out of the driveway. Things started out fine enough. The Rolling Stones “Satisfaction” was cranked up on the eight track and the windows were down. The warm summer air whipped around inside the car as if it were the Santa Anna straight from the western desert. The narrow two-lane highway curved its way through the countryside over gently rolling hills and past woods and bottomland. Anywhere possible, farmers had cultivated large fields of corn, wheat, and soybeans. Tributaries with names like Big Muddy, Little Muddy, and Knob Creek slithered through large stands of timber on their way to the Mississippi.

“Jesus Christ! I’ve never ridden in a car going this fast,” Joe yelled above the noise of the stereo and rushing wind.

“Shit, still winding her out, Joe,” Jim replied with a hearty laugh.

“Better slow down, asshole. That rent-a-cop likes to hide out around this curve,” Rolle quipped.

Then things took a turn. The My Oh My tavern appeared around a bend and Jim let up on the gas. It was a mom-and-pop operation and one of Jim’s places to requisition supplies. Smoke belching from the chimney was a welcome sign—it meant the barbecue pit was still fired up. Jim pulled in and made a request for donations.

“Hey, Jim, get us some beer,” Frank called.

“Yeah, how about those Baby Buds,” Charlie added.

“Have you ever touched the stuff before?” Jim asked.

“Ah, hell, maybe once, but we’re game,” came the response from the others in the car.

The boys stayed in the car while Jim went inside. He soon returned with the goods. As the tavern door opened there was a shout from inside, “You better not give any of that liquor to kids, now. You hear me!”

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There was still time before the show for a joy ride. Jim pulled a beer from the six-pack and passed the others to Rolle, who did the same. As Jim popped the top there was a familiar whoosh. Joe had reservations about this, but reluctantly participated anyway.

“So, what do you think, Joe?” Rolle asked.

“It’s bitter but cold,” replied Joe.

“Now, dammit, don’t guzzle it like a can of Coke, Joe. It’ll sneak up and bite ya’ in the ass,” Rolle warned.

The excursion took them off the highway onto some secondary blacktopped roads. They passed a couple more small towns on this round-about way to the drive-in. When a can of beer was finished, it was ceremoniously tossed out the window. It made a sharp “clink” when it hit the pavement. Embarrassingly, Joe’s first discard was not empty and made a resounding thud. He took some ribbing and made sure it clinked the next time.

It was time for the movie. Frank and Charlie were relegated to the trunk for free admission. By this time they had the giggles and could hardly keep quiet.

“Shut the hell up back there, you stupid jerks, or this will never work!” screamed Rolle, as he and Joe laughed. Their cover was likely blown, but the young admissions attendant let them pass.

Once parked, the trunk was popped and out climbed two pitiful looking guys. The short ride had made them sick and they proceeded to vomit in the parking lot behind the car.

“What the hell is going on back there?” Jim yelled, trying hard not to break into uncontrollable laughter. He knew he was lucky the little dirtballs had gotten out of the car.

Running around after the movie had made Joe late getting home. When they pulled into the driveway, he noted a dim light coming from the front room. Joe stepped from the car slowly,

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aware of his unsteadiness. A wave of nausea was creeping up on him. He entered the house and was thankful to see his dad had gone to bed.

Joe knew he was going to be sick so he decided to go outside. The soft glow from the lamp cast shadows outside the window into the front yard. The darkness grew deeper as Joe turned the corner and headed toward the back of the house. Satisfied that he'd reached a good distance, he vomited, feeling somewhat relieved afterward.

As he started back to the house, a pinpoint of light appeared. It intensified then quickly faded to nothing. Then a voice came through the stillness. It was calm and peaceful.

"You alright, son?" Joe's dad said.

"Yes dad, I'll be fine. I must have eaten a bad hotdog at the movie," Joe answered. His dad had been smoking.

Suddenly, Joe snapped out of his trance, back in the elm, looking for the eerie orange glow in the darkness.

"My God!" Joe thought. Someone out there was smoking a cigarette. Was it the person who chased him or was there someone out there who could help? He remained cramped inside the tree with only his imagination as a companion. He strained his eye trying to relocate the orange glow but couldn't find it. Had the person simply walked past or did he lay in wait for the opportunity to flush Joe out?

Moisture continued to condense and drip from the leaves, but the rain had ceased completely. An uneasy feeling of abandonment swept over Joe. Several times he thought he heard a cough or a muffled groan. His muscles ached the longer he remained in his near-frozen position. He grew impatient for the dawn, but what would the light reveal?

Should he attempt escape under cover of darkness or would that alert his foe? Joe's survival skills in the woods were outstanding. He knew how to remain undetected and quiet in

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his movements. Maybe he could escape undetected.

Joe's dad smoked. What if the person outside really was there to help? Wouldn't he have a flashlight and called out Joe's name? It had been raining and maybe thunder drowned out their cries. How could he be awakened by the tiniest droplets of water but not hear the clap of thunder?

Joe's mind was racing full tilt. He had a crucial decision to make—either stay put or climb down and risk possible exposure.

He decided on the latter.

# CHAPTER

# 5

“Hey, batter, batter. Hey batter!” the guys yelled in a concerted effort to distract the next hitter digging in the box.

Joe and Rolle had finally reached Wendell Skinner’s vacant lot. Wendell’s son had been up early today. The thick green grass had been mown to an exact height of two-and-a-half inches. The sunlight that reflected off the freshly mown grass imparted a dewy sheen that beckoned the boys to play.

Before the game, all had enjoyed a big laugh at Rolle’s unfortunate accident. Harold had his own version of the incident.

“Look at me, Rolle. I’m sitting on the bank picking honeysuckle blossoms. Don’t they smell so fine? Ooh, I hope the little bees don’t sting,” Harold said as he sat in the grass. He placed his hands on his cheeks and feigned a frightened expression.

“You better keep your fat mouth shut or I might rearrange your face,” Rolle snapped back. His tone was less than serious. They



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were good friends. Harold was the team pitcher.

The day was perfect. A few white clouds drifted lazily in a sea of blue sky. A nice breeze blew out towards left field. The field was at the edge of town and the homerun boundary was Mr. Jacob's barbed wire fence. It surrounded another pasture that was home to a few cows. The cows sometimes gave the impression of being a bit more interested in the game than the parents who occasionally gathered to watch. The baselines and infield diamond weren't truly finished, just worn from the many trips around the bases. But it was wide open and smooth—perfect for playing ball.

Jasonville was small and sports not even close to organized. Pick up games were the norm.

“Jeez, bring it down, Harold. He's no giant,” Rolle called out.

Harold turned and spat dark brown juice. Some remained behind, trickling down his chin. He had a mouth full of tobacco.

“Yeah, I know, but he'll swing anyway,” he replied.

The game proceeded as players teamed up to outdo one another. There was an abundance of chatter and yelling and the excitement was contagious.

The parents and friends who did attend the game sought shade beneath a nearby tree. They watched the game and shouted encouragement, but mostly they talked, discussing anything and everything.

“Hey, what's the deal with those characters John Delbert is dragging out to work in the timber?” Sam asked. Sam was Rolle's dad.

John Delbert had tried his best at a plethora of jobs, but none seemed to agree with him. He'd tried construction, janitorial duties, and even farming, but couldn't stick with any of them. Then he decided to work in timber. Somehow

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he got hold of a used flatbed truck, an even older tractor, and a chain saw. He had experience in the timber trade while living out west prior to settling in Jasonville. At the age of forty-three, he was as rough as they come, with a large frame, plenty of muscle, and a very prominent nose. He lived outside of town in the country. His son, Harold, was pitching today.

Mr. Delbert had a simple, square, wood-framed house that supported a high-pitched roof. Near the house was a pole barn for equipment storage that also served as an anchor for a fence. A small house trailer stood on the other side of the short driveway.

“I don’t know where his workers came from. I’ll tell you, though, I wouldn’t want to meet up with any of them alone in the dark,” Lyle said.

“Is there anything to the talk that John is in cahoots with that bastard who works for the rehabilitation center in Westview?” Sam asked. “Maybe that’s how he came across his crew.”

Thirty-eight-year-old Sam Parker worked in Westview, the county seat, about twelve miles east of Jasonville. It was much bigger, with a population of nearly ten thousand. Sam was a salesman for General Tire, which produced tires for the mammoth-sized trucks used to haul coal in the local mines. Sam and his wife, Amy, had been a perfect match and together were raising a fine family.

“I’ve heard people at Molly’s Café talk a lot about John’s crew when they come in for a bite to eat,” Lyle stated. “Pretty rude with the waitresses and more than once apparently under the influence of something. Drugs or alcohol, I don’t know.”

“And Molly’s girl, Katie, has told her mom those men have been very rude to her personally,” Sam said.

“I’m not sure about that bunch, either. I don’t think it’s right. I sure worry, especially having a couple daughters of my own,” piped in Larry Stewart.