

One

Perspiration rolled down the sides of his face and soaked the worn collar of his T-shirt as seven-year-old Joshua Tanner hurried through the waist-high weeds that led to the pond. Every summer since Joshua was four, he had watched the older boys in the housing project disappear into the woods in the afternoon. And since he was four, Joshua had longed to join them. But two things stood in his way – his age and his “Grandma.” The older boys insisted he was “too little”, and his grandma insisted it was “too dangerous.” Today Joshua decided he was tired of both excuses. He didn’t think it was fair to watch another summer go by and not be able to go into the woods and swim in the pond with the big boys. Besides he was tired of watching “Oprah” with his grandma.

Anticipation conquered Joshua, propelling his scrawny legs along the dusty path. “Terrence will be so surprised to see me,” he said excitedly. “I’ll show them I’m big enough. I can swim better than all of ‘em,” he said panting, grass

whipping his bare legs. "I swim in the tub every night 'til Grandma makes me get out."

Joshua had heard plenty of stories about the pond from his grandma and her church friends. Stories of little boys drowning in the pond or getting eaten by bears in the woods were supposed to scare him, but it would take more than a few stories from some old ladies to keep a curious seven-year-old away from an adventure.

"Grandma always wants me to stay in the house," Joshua grumbled. "Always talking 'bout it's too hot or somebody might snatch me and kidnap me. I'll be glad when my mama comes back to get me," he said, his running now turning into a very slow jog. "I bet they got real swimming pools up in Chicago, and I can go swimming any time I want."

Joshua slowed his pace to a walk when he heard the sounds of big trucks on the highway, an indication that he was nearing the pond. He stopped and peeped through the tall grass. Several feet ahead of him was a small bare stretch of land that he mistook for a beach. And beyond the beach lay the famous Ecky's Pond.

Rays of sunlight glared through the large trees and rested on the pond. Two muddy-white ducks glided gracefully across the water while frogs leaped along the edge. A gentle breeze carried the scent of honeysuckle through the air. Joshua took a deep breath. He wanted to remember every detail of his first trip to the pond.

Not wanting to be discovered too soon and sent back home, Joshua crouched behind a bush to wait until the older boys were in the water. “Where are they?” he whispered when he didn’t see them near the water. He quietly inched his way behind another bush with a better view of the pond. Then he saw them. At first he only saw the four boys huddled in a semi-circle. Then he saw the girl. She was lying a few feet away from the pond. Her bright yellow tank top was covered with blood.

Then Joshua saw the knife. One of the boys clutched it securely in his blood-soaked hand. Joshua’s spine tingled and his stomach flipped. His legs went numb. He wanted to run, but his legs wouldn’t respond. His eyes were glued to the scene at the pond. Then it was too late – the boys started running toward the path. Joshua now wished he had listened to his grandmother. Joshua knew he had to hide, and quickly. He stooped lower and tried to crawl under a larger bush. A loose branch caught his shoe. He tried desperately to shake himself loose, but the noisy bush only caused commotion. Joshua tried to get up and run, but his legs felt paralyzed. He fell to the ground and lay on his stomach as he heard heavy feet running his way. He dropped his face into the grass. He was doomed.

One of the boys grabbed Joshua by the collar and yanked him to his feet. “What are you doing out here, you little punk?” His nails were cutting into Joshua’s throat. Tears streamed down Joshua’s face as he stared into the

cold eyes of Allen Smith, a known delinquent infamous for robbing a convenience store.

“I...I was going for a swim. I didn’t see nothing. I swear,” Joshua muttered.

The boys looked at one another. “What do you mean you didn’t see nothing?” Terrence, Joshua’s trusted neighbor, asked.

Fear paralyzed Joshua. This was not the same Terrence who protected him on the playground occasionally. This was the Terrence he’d seen riding in the backseat of a squad car on Saturday nights. “I just got here, I swear. I saw y’all standing by the pond and I tried to run home,” Joshua answered with his fingers crossed behind his back.

Terrence slapped Joshua across the mouth. Joshua shrieked in pain and stumbled backwards onto a bush. Blood spurted from his mouth.

“You’re the little snitch who ratted us out to the cops about the cigarettes we stole from Circle K!” yelled Ron, an ex-gang member who had recently moved to Mississippi from “up North.”

“N-n-no I didn’t,” Joshua stuttered, keeping his fingers crossed. “That was Marvin. Yeah, Marvin told on you. Not me. And I won’t tell nothing this time either.”

“You’re lying, you little rat,” Ron said as he gave Joshua’s side a feel of his size 11 Nike. Joshua screamed and curled into a fetal position. “I won’t tell nothing. Just leave me alone,” he sobbed.

“I thought you didn’t see anything,” Ron said, his voice intimidating.

“I mean I won’t tell nobody you beat me up. Please just let me go home,” begged Joshua. “My grandma will be looking for me.” Joshua wrapped his arms tightly around his stomach. Through his window of tears he could see the four boys towering over him. Fear and anxiety also covered their faces. Joshua now wished he hadn’t lied to his grandmother about going to play at Marvin’s. If only he had told the truth, she would have stopped him from going and he wouldn’t be in this mess.

“What are we gonna do with him?” asked Jay, a red-haired, freckled kid who was plagued by paranoia. Both his voice and his body were shaking.

Terrence glanced around the woods as if looking for an answer. He was at least four inches taller than the other boys, which made him look older than his fourteen years. His childish muscles had begun to bulge slightly, and a thin mustache was trying to break through to add maturity to his face. “We can’t let him leave. He’ll run straight home and tell his grandma everything. We have to get rid of him,” he said without emotion.

“No, I won’t. I promise,” Joshua pleaded. He began to cry harder and louder. He wasn’t ready to die. He had always wanted to go to Six Flags in Atlanta, or at least travel outside of Mississippi.

“Please don’t hurt me guys,” he begged. “I’ll do anything you ask. Just let me live.”

“Come on, Terrence,” said Jay, his voice still shaky and weak. “We’re already in a lot of trouble.”

“We’ll be in even more trouble if we let him leave here,” said Terrence.

So gripped by terror, Joshua wasn’t aware that his pants were soaked. His mind was on the knife in Ron’s hand and on how he could somehow get on Terrence’s good side again. “Terrence, I’ve never done nothing bad to you,” he argued. “Why would you want to hurt me?”

Terrence didn’t answer.

“I don’t want to die, Terrence,” Joshua muttered again.

“You should’ve thought of that before you came out here,” said Ron the gangbanger. “I say we drown him,” he told the others. “It’ll look like an accident.”

“Come on, guys. He’s just a little kid,” Jay said with a nervous laugh. “We can give him money or something. He’ll keep quiet.”

“That’s what you said about Sandy,” snapped Allen.

“I’ll be quiet. I promise,” Joshua said with a desperate voice. “I won’t be like her. Girls always talk too much. Boys don’t.”

“Sorry, kid, you can’t be trusted either,” said Ron. “Little kids have bigger mouths than girls.”

“I can be trusted,” Joshua said hurriedly. “Please, Terrence, I promise I can be trusted this time. You know I won’t say nothing.”

Terrence looked toward the pond. “Let’s just get this over with,” he said.

Joshua resisted all the way to the pond. He thought about all the lies he’d told and how his grandmother kept warning him about the devil coming after children who lied a lot. The devil had come to get him.

Joshua was petrified when his body hit the dingy water. A scream echoed through the woods as Joshua’s head was buried under the water. He instinctively held his breath in defense against the clutches of death. It wasn’t long before his luck ran out, and the murky water began to seep into his nostrils. Joshua began to cough as the water engulfed his nostrils and throat. The kicks from his scrawny legs were no match for the grips of the teenagers. Joshua stopped struggling.

Jay Stringer stared at the still body he was holding under the water. “He’s dead!” he yelled with a frantic voice. “He’s dead!” He began to sob loudly. Jay’s head was light and his stomach knotted. “We’ve gotta do something!” he screamed. His voice was wild. Jay snatched the lifeless body away from Ron and cradled the seven-year-old like a baby as he hurriedly waded out of the

pond. He placed the body on the ground and began to try to resuscitate it.

“What are you doing!” yelled Ron. “He’s dead, man, you should’ve left him in the pond!”

“Let’s just get out of here!” Allen screamed deliriously.

“We can’t just leave them like this!” cried Jay.

“It’s over, Jay,” Terrence said. “Joshua’s dead, and so is Sandy. Now let’s just go before anybody else comes out here.”

Jay didn’t move. He just kneeled beside Joshua’s body as he rocked back and forth and sobbed. “What have we done?” he moaned as he buried his face into his palms.