

Under The Blood Tree

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Prologue

Thursday, August 26, 1999

10:55 PM

A distant lightning flash lit up the western night sky as four boys frantically ran through the wooded acreage bordering Cypress Lake Mobile Home Park. The stagnant, humid, summer air, combined with a temperature near ninety degrees, drenched their skin with sweat. Adrenaline flooded their young bodies, heightening the fear that caused them to race through the woods. To the northwest, along the storm front, thunder rumbled. Directly overhead, a full moon and an array of stars were visible. They headed towards the place they knew as their home base, their hiding place, their outdoor club. They knew they could take refuge under their tree.

Billy Ray Duke, the youngest of the four by just a year, yelled in his high-pitched, panicked, southern drawl, “Wait up! Hey, wait up!”

Tommy Alexander, the unofficial leader of the group, yelled back, “We’re almost there! Come on, keep runnin’!”

The lightning flashes were roughly half a minute apart. The booming sounds of thunder rumbled off in the distance. Tommy hoped that the storm was headed their way, praying that a heavy rain would wash away any signs that he and his friends had been to Cypress Lake that evening.

Just fifty more yards now and Tommy would be the first to arrive safely at the tree. Andy Pepperdine was close behind, followed by Curtis Hardy. Billy Ray brought up the rear.

Tommy arrived at the tree. He wiped his face with his arm and noticed blood, mixed with his sweat. He felt his nose,

then along his cheek, and found the spot where he had caught a branch in the face, a small cut oozing red. His lungs burned from exertion after running full tilt for a quarter-mile.

Andy Pepperdine arrived at the tree as Tommy worked to catch his breath. He noticed the trickle of blood on Tommy's face. "Looks like ya got whipped with a branch." He paused, taking deep, sucking breaths. "It don't look too bad."

Tommy leaned against the tree, his sweat mixed with blood. "You got a couple cuts on your arms."

As Andy took more deep breaths, he looked down at both arms, inspecting the minor damage. There was no flowing blood, but he had numerous scratches. He motioned towards Tommy's arms and said, "So do you."

Curtis Hardy ran up and dropped to his knees on the damp leaves that covered the ground near their tree. He put one hand on the tree and continued to breathe deep, sweat dripping from his chin. He kept looking down, his eyes unfocused, deep in thought. He said nothing and didn't appear to notice the scratches on his arms and another on his forehead. Like Andy, nothing was bleeding, but the scratches would sting over the next few days. He didn't look up at Tommy or Andy, but just kept up the deep, sucking gasps, fighting to get as much oxygen into his lungs as possible.

Finally, Billy Ray Duke broke into the clearing under the tree. He fell to his hands and knees, trying to catch his breath. As he watched the ground in front of him, he saw blood drip from his nose onto a leaf...then another, and seconds later, another. He screamed, "I'm bleeding! Daggummit, I'm bleeding!"

Tommy, whose breathing was now less labored, squatted down next to him and put his left hand on his back. "Billy Ray, calm down. Y'all's gonna be fine. Lemme see what's bleedin'."

Billy Ray leaned back on his haunches and looked up at his friend. A short gash, about three-quarters of an inch long, was right between his eyebrows. The cut was at a slight angle,

higher on the left side. It bled steadily, a drop of blood hitting the ground every second.

Tommy said, "Take off yer tee shirt. Hold it against yer hard-assed head. It'll stop in a few minutes."

The boys fell silent, replaying the last twenty minutes over in their heads. They all knew it was going to change their lives – perhaps forever.

* * *

Nearly thirty-five minutes earlier, Tommy was the first to hear the cries. The night air had been still, just as it was now. The only sounds heard at their hide-out were crickets, the occasional passing car on Cypress Lake Road, and faint country music coming from a trailer at the mobile home park over two hundred yards to the northeast. Tommy had hushed his friends.

"Y'all be quiet." After a long pause, Tommy cocked his head so his right ear was towards the lake. He heard it again. "Didj'all hear it?"

Andy Pepperdine asked, "What're ya talking about? I didn't hear nuthin'."

"Me neither." Billy Ray stood, cupping his hands around his ears, straining to hear anything out of the ordinary.

Then they all heard it; someone crying, the sobs carrying a long distance over the quiet, night air. As they listened, lightning again flashed in the distance followed nearly ten seconds later by distant, rolling thunder. When the low-level boom from the thunder subsided, they heard the crying again.

Tommy said, "We got to see whose cryin'. Come on, follow me."

The four boys headed out towards the lake. As they made their way through the woods, the crying grew louder. They had gone some five hundred yards, through thickets of trees and brush, when they came to Cypress Lake Road, which separated the woods and the trailer park from Cypress Lake. They crouched low, looking up and down the road for any traffic. There were no headlights in sight. It was past 10:00

PM. The sunset was long gone, but a full moon cast an eerie, silver film over the lake's glass-like surface. The distant storm contrasted with the clear sky overhead.

The crying was very clear now. There were no homes within two hundred yards. A crude access road led down to the lake's shore. A gate, that had previously been closed and secured with a chain and padlock, sat wide open, the padlock broken for as long as the boys could remember. They had regularly used the road to go to the lake and catch tadpoles and frogs.

Tommy's three friends looked to him for direction. Sensing their apprehension, Tommy had stood up. "Let's go."

They trotted down the path towards the edge of the lake, the sobs now mixed with whimpering. "Help me. Please, help me."

The path ended at a stand of trees by the lake's edge. The trees hid any view of this stretch of shoreline from the road. The bright, full moon cast shadows from the trees onto the water's surface.

The foursome approached the trees slowly. When they were within fifty feet, they saw a young girl, about their age, leaning against a car's rear bumper. The front end of the car faced the lake and was near the water's edge. They couldn't tell the make or model of the car, but all four boys had immediately recognized the girl.

Carly Sue Saxon had not noticed the boys approaching until they were within fifteen feet. Even in the dark of night, with the moonlight blocked by the trees, Tommy saw her anguish. Her clothes and face were a dirty mess. The boys stopped just ten feet away.

When there was a brief break in her crying, Tommy spoke. "Carly Sue?"

She jumped to her feet and covered her mouth.

Tommy said, "It's just us, Carly Sue. We heard ya cryin'. Are ya alright?"

She knew the four boys, though she knew Billy Ray best. Billy Ray's trailer was just one hundred feet from the trailer where Carly Sue lived.

She stood, turned towards the car, then back at the boys. In a quivering, scared voice, she said, "Help me, please."

Tommy, confusion written on his face, took a few tentative steps towards her and asked, "What do ya want us ta do?"

She turned to the car and paused. "Push it into the lake."

Tommy frowned. He thought *What?* With disbelief in his voice, he asked, "Push what into the lake? That car?" The other three boys laughed, then stopped when they realized that she was dead serious.

Carly Sue said nothing, but nodded her head. She had her hands folded in front of her as if praying to the boys, or to God. Tommy couldn't tell which. Even though the temperature had to be near ninety degrees, she was shivering.

Tommy scratched his head then turned to his friends. After a pause he said, "Y'all heard the lady. Let's push this wreck into the lake."

The four boys got behind the bumper and started to push as hard as they could, but the car wouldn't budge. Carly Sue moved in between Tommy and Andy and began pushing with all her might. The body of the car rose then settled back on the frame, but remained stationary. Tommy thought, *This thing's still in gear. I'll fix that.*

He walked around to the driver's side door. The window was down and the odor of urine and feces hit him like a brick. He held his nose and looked through the open window. The body of a man was in the driver's seat, blood crusted on the side of his head.

He turned away from the car, nausea hammering his stomach. He wretched twice and threw up his dinner next to the front of the car.

Andy ran to his side. "What's the matter, Tommy?" Then his nose was assaulted by the odor and he saw the body.

Curtis and Billy Ray came around the car and saw what caused Tommy to lose his dinner. They all stood in fear, then looked back at Carly Sue who started to cry loudly again. Tommy knew that he had to quiet her or they would all be in big trouble.

He wiped his face off with his arm and raced around the car to the crying young girl. He grabbed her shoulders and turned her square to face him. He begged her to quiet down, assuring her that they'd help her. He didn't know why she needed to hide that body, but trusted that it had to be important.

After half a minute, Carly Sue quieted down. Tommy put the car in neutral, and the five children pushed with all their might. At first the car moved slowly. Once the front end was in the water, it seemed to float and pushing the car became easier. Finally, the car was fully into the lake. They gave the vehicle a final push. It floated for fifty, seventy, one hundred feet.

Carly Sue started crying again. Tommy asked, "What's the matter now, Carly Sue?"

"It ain't sinkin'. Somebody's gonna see it floatin' out there."

As if on cue, bubbles started coming up around the sides of the car. It drifted out another fifty feet then disappeared from sight. All five children gave a big sigh of relief. The gravity of what they had just done began to dawn on them.

Tommy turned to Carly Sue and said, "Y'all go on home now. We'll walk ya to the road, then yer on yer own."

When Carly Sue left them and headed towards Cypress Lake Mobile Home Park, Tommy turned to his friends and said, "We gotta get outta here."

As they rose to head across the road, the headlights of a car shown as it came around a curve. The boys crouched back down, staying out of sight. As the car passed, they saw the rack lights on top of the car and the shield of the Bulloch County Sheriff's Department on the door. The car passed, but it seemed to take forever. When the tail lights were finally out of

sight, they ran. And they kept running until they gathered at the tree.

* * *

“What’re we gonna do?”

Curtis Hardy asked the question that was on each of their minds. He was still on his knees, looking at the ground in front of him, trying to catch his breath.

They all looked at Tommy. He was supposed to have all the answers. Tommy had decided they should find the source of the crying. Tommy decided they should help Carly Sue, without question or hesitation. Tommy found the body in the car. And Tommy always knew what to do in tough situations, like when they threw a baseball and broke old lady Crider’s trailer window.

But this...this was something completely different, and they all knew it.

Tommy looked at his friends, noted the fear in their eyes, the anticipation of hearing his solution to their situation.

In that moment, Tommy knew that their days of innocence were over.

He drew out his knife. He told his friends to get their knives out as well. He scraped a section of bark from their tree. The fresh wood oozed sticky sap.

He turned to his friends. They all had their knives in hand. He said, “We ain’t never gonna to talk ‘bout this again. That’s what we’re gonna do. And we’re gonna pledge with our blood, right here on our tree.”

He looked hard at his friends. He saw fear and doubt. There were questions in their eyes, but none on their lips. Then he saw resolve.

Tommy said, “Take y’all’s knives and make a cut on yer hand then place yer hand on the tree in that spot.” He pointed to the bare spot that he had just created on the tree. “When ya do, say *I pledge that I ain’t sayin’ nuthin’ ‘bout this night the rest of my life.* And ya darn sure better mean it.” He looked at his friends again. “Are y’all ready?”

The three boys took a deep breath and nodded.

Tommy started. He placed the tip of his knife in the palm of his hand and applied a little pressure. A bead of blood popped up. He placed his palm on the tree then pulled it back. A one-inch circle of blood remained.

Next, Andy Pepperdine repeated what Tommy had done. Then Curtis Hardy.

It was Billy Ray Duke's turn. Billy Ray was nervous. When he put the tip of his knife to his palm, he put too much pressure on his knife and cut into his palm, leaving a one-inch gash. Blood flowed freely from the wound. Even so, he placed his hand on the bare spot on the tree over top of the other's blood.

Tommy gave Billy Ray a nervous smile. "Between yer head and yer hand, ya might bleed to death. Use yer shirt on yer hand now. I think yer head's about sealed up."

Billy Ray didn't laugh or smile. Unlike his three friends, he was pretty sure that he knew why there was a dead body in the car that was now at the bottom of Cypress Lake. He looked up at the mixed blood on the tree and hoped the body would remain there for eternity.

Chapter 1

Sixteen Years Later
Friday, May 29, 2015
7:45 AM

Tommy Alexander stood in front of the kitchen sink, staring out the window but seeing nothing in his back yard. He was in a trance, a hot cup of black coffee in his right hand. Worry exaggerated the lines on his face. He wrapped his left hand around the mug, its warmth soothing to the small scar on his left palm. He did not see his children's fancy wooden play set that would rival some city parks, or the patio, or the shed, where he stored his top-of-the-line lawn equipment. He also didn't see his white privacy fence, or the second floor of his closest neighbor's home. It was like he was staring at a movie screen, the images running through his mind.

The kitchen television droned on in the background, one of the national network's morning news programs reporting the drought's severity in the southeast. They mentioned Central Georgia as being hit particularly hard, the screen filled with images of parched earth, dead crops, and farmers tilling under the dry, brown, vegetation that remained. Reporters interviewed a number of family-farm owners, discussing the financial dire straits that they faced because of the total loss of crops this year. This year's drought, coupled with last year's crop loss due to torrential rain, left many farmers near bankruptcy. Some already faced foreclosure, their land and equipment auctioned off. In some cases, the land had been in the family for generations. The heartbreak was punctuated by tears flowing from grown men's eyes, facing

extraordinary pressure to keep their farms, and their families, afloat.

Tommy didn't hear any of it. He wasn't concerned about money. At twenty-eight years old, he was quite successful as an independent insurance salesman. His family's net worth surpassed one million dollars, all of it through hard work and dedication to his business. Their home, a thirty-nine hundred square foot, two-story gem in the Irongate subdivision, was among the nicer homes in the upscale neighborhood southwest of Statesboro, Georgia.

He wasn't concerned about his family's health. His beautiful wife, Cheryl, and two young daughters, age six and four, were in excellent health. Life was good, and improving, as long as he kept his mind on work at the office, kept his family happy at home, and kept the two separate.

Tommy worked long hours, ensuring that his customers were properly insured. He used every tool at his disposal to recruit new customers. The growing business was largely based on referrals. His excellent reputation in the community, and his business ties through a number of civic organizations, also helped him connect with new leads.

His wife entered the kitchen and noticed him staring off into nothingness...again. Something was on his mind, which wasn't unusual. He was a deep thinker, his thoughts frequently wandering to the next great idea. She snuck up behind him and cautiously got his attention by clearing her throat while placing a hand on his left shoulder.

Tommy tensed but didn't flinch. His mug of coffee remained steady. He smiled, the back yard coming into focus, as the trance disappeared. From behind him, Cheryl's arms looped around his waist and she planted her head between his shoulder blades.

She commented, "The girls are dressed and ready for school. They should be down in a few minutes."

Tommy put his left arm over his wife's arms and squeezed lightly, then took a sip of coffee. He set the cup on

the ceramic countertop and turned around, taking his wife in a warm embrace.

She looked up into his eyes. “Hey, sweetie, what’s got y’all twisted up?”

She knew him too well, read him like a cheap airplane novel. He gave her a weak smile. “This drought. I mean, look at the lawn. It’s baked to a crispy brown. I hate to walk on it, the dirt’s so hard underneath. Gonna be another scorcher today, and tomorrow, and Sunday.”

“It can’t last forever, baby. I know we haven’t had a good rain since...well, it’s been a while. But, like the Good Book says, this too shall pass.”

“Yeah, but it’s already done a lot of damage. Insurance companies are paying out a lot of claims. I’m worried.”

He hugged Cheryl tight and kissed her lightly on the lips until he heard his older daughter say, “Yuck. Don’t come in here, Mommy and Daddy are kissin’.”

The younger daughter smiled, then mimicked her sister. “Yuck.” The girls laughed. It made Tommy smile, despite his mood.

Cheryl said, “Okay girls. Get your book bags and lunches and head out to your dad’s car. Just another week of school, then you get a break for summer.” She raised her arms in the air and yelled, “Yea!” Her girls joined her in the cheer.

Cheryl turned back to Tommy and put her arms back around his waist. “Try to relax, dear. No matter what, we have the girls and we have each other.” She smiled at the man who had been her high school hunk, her college study partner, her best friend, and her lover. She loved him deeply to this day. “See you around six?”

“Wouldn’t miss dinner with my favorite girls. Where would you like to go?”

“Why don’t we stay in and order a pizza? I’ll pick up a movie. Any preference?”

Tommy thought for a moment. “Not really. You and the girls pick. Lady’s choice tonight.”

They kissed again. Tommy and the girls headed for the garage.

* * *

Tommy dropped the girls off at Trinity Episcopal School. As they exited his gold Lexus, he told them to study hard even though the year was nearly over. He added that their mother would pick them up at the end of the day. He hugged them and kissed them. The girls turned and headed to the building, meeting up with a couple friends at the door. He smiled as he turned and got back in his car to head for the office near the intersection of South Main Street and Fair Road.

On the ten-minute drive from the school to the office, his mind wandered. He thought about the drought. He hated lying to his wife about anything and in reality, he had not lied. He really was worried about the drought, but not because of his company or its stock value or his clients. He was worried about shrinking lake levels...actually, just one lake level – Cypress Lake. He knew Cheryl was right, the drought would pass. The big question was *When*. The second question was *Would it be soon enough*. He believed the answers to his questions were *No time soon* and *No, it won't*.

* * *

By 7:30 AM, Andy Pepperdine was already at Low Country Seed and Supply Company, his farm supply store and warehouse. He liked to be the first to arrive and greet his employees with a smile and breakfast; usually doughnuts or bagels, sometimes egg-bacon-and-cheese sandwiches, or roll-ups, and coffee. He didn't have to do it, he just did it. What didn't get devoured by his employees was immediately taken to a homeless shelter down the street. It was a tradition that his father started years before. When his father decided that, at age fifty-five, he and his wife should retire, move to Naples, Florida, and turn the business over to their son, Andy decided to continue the daily ritual.

His employees weren't too sure how the transition would go. They loved working for Marvin Pepperdine. They found that little changed when Andy took the reins of the

company. In fact, things improved slightly, if that was possible. Andy started a profit sharing program and a voluntary service program, where employees could work up to four hours each week at a charitable organization of their choice and get paid by the company. They just had to show proof of participation for the charity. It was a win-win for the company and the community.

Andy sat at his desk, reviewing the month-to-date totals, but found that he could not concentrate. He subconsciously rubbed the palm of his left hand where a scar had developed some sixteen years ago. A small cut, made with his pocket knife, had initially not healed well. He played with the cut with dirty hands, not allowing the wound to scab over and heal naturally. At the time, it didn't look like much, but over the next two days, the wound got infected. Before he finally told his mother, it was open and oozing.

The trip to the doctor was more painful than the treatment as his mother lectured him the entire time about taking care of himself. After a deep cleaning, treatment with some kind of antibacterial salve, and repeated admonishments to keep the wound clean and covered, the healing took about two weeks. The resulting scar was about an inch long by a quarter-inch wide. That wasn't so bad, except that the skin was harder and less flexible than the rest of the skin on his palm, making it difficult to grip anything.

As he continued to rub the scar, he thought about the extended drought. He drove past Cypress Lake the previous Friday. The level was down significantly, the drought-enhanced shoreline extending out, twenty to thirty feet beyond historical norms. He was so distracted that he almost clipped a car coming in the opposite direction.

When he got home that evening, his wife noticed his glum expression. They spoke about the drought and what it was doing to local farmers – their customers. It would no doubt hurt business, but they would weather the storm. They would even provide whatever assistance they could to help others in their time of need. Their ten-million-dollar net worth would

take a hit, but it would be nothing compared to some farmers who lived year to year, relying on a good harvest, and decent crop prices for their survival.

As he had many times over the years, he thought about how expensive a good criminal lawyer might be. After all, they hadn't reported a crime when they knew one had been committed. Tommy said that they needed to just forget about it, as if they had not been to the lake that night, they had not seen the dead man in the car, and they had not helped Carly Sue push it into the lake. They had not even taken the time to ask Carly Sue how a dead body came to be in the car. It all happened so fast...

"Mornin', Andy."

Andy jumped, having been jolted out of his thoughts by his General Foreman, Lucas Grieves, walking into his office with a bagel lathered in blueberry cream cheese in one hand, and a steaming, hot cup of coffee in the other.

"Mornin', Lucas."

"Drought gotcha in a fog this morning?"

"That easy to tell?"

"Oh yeah. I think everybody's got the funk over it. Gonna put lots of folks in the poor house, that's for sure. We need the government to step in and give us some guarantees that we're not all gonna go broke."

"Yeah, well, don't hold your breath with that bunch up in Washington. They can't even agree to disagree. I think we ought to toss 'em all out and start over."

Lucas grinned. People screamed about it every election cycle. Throw out the bums and put in a new set of bums. But the old bums always seem to win.

Lucas said, "Our best bet is to keep praying. That's got as good a chance as any to end this drought and get our customers back in business. I guess that's why the good Lord said to stock up when ya got plenty, and ration when you got little. Something like that." Lucas took another big bite of his bagel, then washed it down with a swig of coffee.

Andy gave a weak smile. “Would you mind looking over these month-to-date reports when you get a few minutes? I’m going to take a look around, greet everybody as they come in. I’ve got to get my mind in a right place, get outta this gloom and doom. Maybe a chat with the crew will help me think positive. What do you think?”

“It can’t hurt. This drought, the heat, I know it’s on everybody’s mind. Anything we can do to keep us and the crew thinkin’ positive is good. We’ve got it pretty darn good here. Maybe if we think about how much better off we are than some folks out there, it might help.”

“You got that right.” He smiled. “Did you leave any bagels for anyone else?”

Lucas smiled back. “I think there’s a crumb or two.”

Andy went out by the table that had the daily breakfast spread. He smiled as he greeted his employees and spoke with them about their families, their hobbies, their children and grandchildren – anything but the weather. The men and women appeared to appreciate their boss being so interested in their lives. If they came in with a bit of the blues, they left the breakfast table uplifted, if even just a little, before they started their workday.

Andy headed back to the office. Lucas was talking on the phone when he stepped in.

He heard only one-half of the conversation, but Lucas’ face was tense. When he was done, Lucas said, “That was Curt Hardy with the City Water Department. They said they’re calling all their commercial customers to let us know first, before they announce it to the residents. Their gonna start rationing water. We have to reduce usage by forty percent.”

Andy’s heart sank. Hearing Curtis Hardy’s name, he wondered if Curtis was feeling the pressure from the drought. Apparently, the city believed that the drought would continue, unabated. After talking with his employees, he felt pretty good. Now the room seemed to close in around him.

He said a prayer to himself. *Lord, please protect my family from the coming storm. They had no part in this. And*

Lord, I don't know how deep that lake is, but we could sure use some rain...a lot of rain if you don't mind.