

Chapter 1

The farmland night sky is ablaze with orange glowing light and the stink of burning wood. It is shortly before five o'clock Good Friday, April ninth, nineteen seventy-one. The closest neighbor, a half-mile away, makes an emergency call to the Morrow fire department.

The elderly farmer couldn't sleep, the stench consuming his nostrils, and arthritic legs pounding him awake. He rolls out of bed earlier than normal and struggles to pull on his overalls. It was a tough night and a rougher morning. Days like this he grieves having lived alone since his wife passed years prior.

He makes his way to the front door following the beam of the flashlight clenched in his fist. He snatches his favorite sweat-stained straw hat off the rack, and he steps onto the front porch. The man takes one painfully slow step at a time down the four stairs and starts across the yard towards the barn. An old hound dog drags behind. Looking around, he sees the radiant western sky above his overgrown orchard.

Alone on the moonless dark road in a timeworn Ford pickup he misses, by mere seconds, the marina-blue Chevelle SS screaming past along the dirt road and sliding onto the main paved thoroughfare. It thunders, lights off, into the pitch-black horizon. The near-deft farmer might have heard the car if he remembered to put in his hearing aids.

The neighbor arrives at the disaster a good half-hour before the rural volunteer firefighters show up. The home has been an uncontrolled inferno for well over an hour. There isn't much they can do, outside of preventing the adjacent trees and overgrown dead-grass from spreading the flames.

Chief Jeff Gaulin gets on his radio and calls for assistance from the larger Lincoln City fire station. Morrow's outdated small tender is already halfway through its main tank as Lincoln's large Mack pumper pulls onto the scene and helps spray water on the lost home. An hour later all left is charred ember studded framing sporadically standing. Everything else is a smoldering heap of low flames and ash. Finally, both engines soak the remaining cinders and standby to let the mass fizzle out on its own. All left is a waiting game; it is going to be a long day.

As the sun peeks over the eastern hills, an A1 fire investigation team shows up called in from Fayetteville, the largest city in Washington County. Henry Mitchell is the lead man with thirty years' experience, while his partner has been working with him for the last seven. They survey the destruction.

Gaulin approaches the team. "Good morning, gentlemen."

"Morning Jeff," Mitchell reciprocates, "doesn't look like we can get started for a while." He turns to his partner and suggests they go for eggs and toast. "We'll see you later, Chief."

Just before noon, the investigators are back. They stand around catching up with various acquaintances for another hour. Gaulin explains that the first man on the scene was Charles Stone and points in the direction of the neighboring farm. He returned home just after sun up.

The two-man team drives over to talk with Charlie. The farmer tells them he hasn't seen the young family for a while and prays they are all right. Other than that he knows not what happened.

Back on the scene, the investigators suit up in their Velocity Nomex protective gear. They start shifting through the edge debris, before working their way into the depths of the destroyed structure.

Mitchell is where he believes should be a back bedroom. Carefully he scrapes away malodorous rubble uncovering a tiny-charcoaled encrusted foot. Continuing meticulously on, a small body comes to light. The fragile burnt lump cannot be more than a year old if that.

“I got something here!” his partner bellows.

“There is a baby over here,” Mitchell returns.

Both men head to their vehicle. They need relief from the scorching ash piles. Between them, they guzzle a gallon of water. Mitchell radios to have a coroner come to the area.

The men return to their gruesome task. Just before dark, they finally finish. The two distorted blackened bodies are all they unearth.