

# THE HOSSMEN

## Chapter One

It was the first real day of spring. The daytime temperatures had steadily climbed out of the frigid teens of January and February, through the twenties of March, and quickly into the low fifties this month, April. Now, late in the month, it had reached the sixties. Most all of the snow had melted, except for dirty remnants of the mountains where people had piled the white stuff high clearing the sidewalks and the streets during the seemingly endless winter months. They were almost all gone, too.

Also gone were the long cold nights. And gone were the dark dull cloudy days where you saw your breath and felt the cold rush into your lungs as you breathed through your nose. The weatherman had predicted a high in the upper 60's today. "We might even break the 70-degree mark," he added with temptation dripping off his voice as the female news anchor hummed with hopeful anticipation.

David Freeman preferred to watch the weather channel in recent years. Network television shows were boring and predictable to him. The cable channels offered only an occasionally interesting program. He'd stopped watching the news many years ago because of their liberal slant. From time to time, he would check out their viewpoint just to see if their tone had changed. "Too predictable," he'd sigh and vow to never watch the news again... until a week or so later when he'd check in one more time.

Baseball was still his passion. It had been his entire life. Whether he was watching it live or on TV or listening to it on the radio, it was the link to his younger and better days. It always had been. He dreamed of those times when he would listen to the Cubs games with his Grandpa Norm and Jack, his Dad, on the huge old wooden console radio at his grandparents' farm near Mattoon, Illinois. He could hear the crack of the bat across the air waves and visualize the ball rocketing on a line in between the outfielders. The crowd cheered as the batter raced around first and headed into second. "A stand-up double for the lead-off hitter," the announcer would note. "No one out here in the bottom of the fourth. Cubs are up four to two, looking to add to that lead." The lead might evaporate, but David's recollections of those days never would.

Grandpa Norm, Jack, the old radio, and even the farm were gone now, but the memories were still fresh. He held on to those good memories, especially when it came to baseball.

David would dream of the days when he played his most serious seasons of baseball in high school and college. The fuel that always brought the flame to a fervent fire was the years from junior high through high school when he played with his closest friends, nicknamed "The Hossmen." This band of brothers was hard-working, hard-playing, average looking kids with raw talent and a fury for working to win. They pulled for each other through the spring and into the summer, winning through determination and losing only enough to develop a white-hot rage

to conquer that opponent sometime down the line.

The classic “hoss” game was a summer contest that found them trailing 7-2 in the top of the last inning. With one out, the other team began bagging up their equipment, thinking the game was over except for the shouting. All four of the Hossmen - David, Tomáš, Adam, and the Rocket - noticed their opponent’s gesture of cockiness at the same time and looked into each other’s steely eyes. No words were said. All four of them knew what had to be done.

Each one of the Hossmen got hits and drove in runs, six altogether. They took the lead 8-7 and forced the other team to unpack their equipment and bat one more time in the bottom of the seventh.

The other team made two quick outs, but their best hitter got a hit and then took second and then third on two pitches the Hossmen’s tired out catcher couldn’t get a glove on. The coach called time out and surprised everyone by bringing David in to catch. On the next pitch, the runner from third tried to steal home, but David stood firm and tagged him out. The Hossmen won the game. David sustained a nasty gash on his knee from the runner’s spikes, but the blood on his uniform made the victory that much sweeter. As David limped off the field, arm in arm with Tomáš, he smiled and said, “Now, they can pack up their gear and go home.” *How many years had passed since that day?* he thought. *35? 40?* And yet that memory of victory and camaraderie was still so vivid in his mind’s eye.

And now it was spring once more. Baseball season was starting all over again. The snow was melting and the grass was dominating the landscape again with its waves of green. The whole earth was starting over again. David was thirsty for orange juice. *Always a great way to start another day* he thought. “One more season, Lord?” David prayed. “Surely, You can let me have one more season.”