

## Chapter Three

Jess hurried back to the ranch. He thought again about the three men. *What if they're still hanging around? What if I run into them again? What would I do?* Then he figured that they were long gone and he needn't worry about it.

Jess turned left onto the path up to the house. The house was small but it was all they needed. The house sat about fifteen hundred feet back off the road and as Jess was riding up the path to the house he looked over to the right to see if his pa was still plowing. He spotted the horse and plow sitting still in the middle of the field, but not his pa. Jess could see that his pa has already plowed quite a bit of ground. It was soft ground and fertile. You could pick up a handful of the black dirt and smell the richness of it. He pulled the wagon up to the front of the house so that he could unload the supplies. It seemed unusually quiet around the house but Jess was hungry and he hurriedly tied The Paint to the front porch railing and quickly headed up the steps of the house.

He swung the screen door open and just as he was about to exclaim how hungry he was...he froze in complete horror. He stood there motionless, his eyes fixed to the grizzly scene before him. He couldn't speak even though his mouth was stuck open. Tears began to stream from his eyes but he didn't really notice them. His knees almost buckled for a split-second but somehow he caught himself and stayed upright. His muscles began to tremble. His lips trembled and the tears began to flood his eyes and blur his vision. The carnage before him was one that no boy should ever have to witness.

His mother's body was hanging in the doorway going to the sleeping quarters of the house. The ropes that were tied around her wrists were tied to nails at the top corners of the doorway. There was a huge pool of blood on the floor surrounding her feet. Within the pool of blood was her dress, which was torn and ripped. The dress was soaked in blood. Her body had been slashed and stabbed repeatedly, and her throat had been cut. Blood had streamed down her body in a dozen places. Her face was black and blue and one eye was so full of blood you couldn't tell if the eye was still there. Her knees were slightly bent. Her head was tilted to one side and slightly back. Jess's legs finally gave out and he dropped to his knees. His face was covered with tears. He began to cry. It was not a loud cry, just enough to hear a slight moan from his lips. He raised his arms slightly and held them out as if wanting to hug her, but he just couldn't move. He knelt there for another few minutes before he began to have any other conscious thought other than what was before him. Then, after several minutes, a thought was able to slowly pierce his terrorized state of mind. Jess took in a deep breath and realized he hadn't been breathing for the last few minutes. His body jolted as the thought finally took hold. *Pa!*

Jess stood up slowly. His legs were still trembling and he almost fell to his knees again. He knew he had to tear his eyes away from the doorway. He found the will to turn and go back out the front door. He looked out to where his pa had been plowing. The horse and plow was still there, but there was no sign of his pa. He started to walk in that direction. As he did, he saw something on the ground behind the plow. He started running. "Pa!" Jess screamed, "Pa!"

As he reached the horse and plow, he saw his pa's body lying beside the plow. Jess knelt down next to his pa. John had been shot several times. One shot in the chest, one in the stomach and two in the head. His shirt was soaked in blood. Jess laid his head on his pa's chest and sobbed. He raised his head up and looked towards the house again and sobbed his ma's name. He laid his head on his pa's chest again. After what seemed an eternity, he gathered enough strength to stand up. He was still in shock. He stumbled backwards from his pa towards the house a few dozen steps and then he slowly turned towards the house. He stopped about two hundred feet from the house, not sure if he could summon the courage to go back in there. He stood there for a few minutes and then another thought began to prick at his brain, trying to get at his subconscious. It pricked and pricked until it was able to take hold and then it came rushing in. *Samantha! Oh my God, where was Samantha!*

Jess took a few steps towards the house and then stopped as if he had hit an invisible brick wall. He swallowed hard and wiped the tears from his eyes. He knew that he had to look for Samantha and that meant he had to go back into the house but he couldn't—he just couldn't. *Windows*, he thought. He walked around to the back of the house and got within two feet of the first window. He leaned his back against the outside wall of the house and tried to gain the courage to look inside. *Will she be dead too? He wondered. Was she hiding?*

He gathered up enough courage and slowly stepped up to the window of his pa's room and looked inside. There was no sign of Samantha. Thinking that she might be hiding, Jess called out, "Samantha?" Nothing. He made his way over to the other window. He looked in the window. Again, he called her name. "Samantha?" There was no response. *Where are you*, he wondered? He turned towards the barn and stable. He walked over to the barn. The door was already open. He walked into the barn and called out his sister's name. He looked around and was getting ready to climb the ladder to the top floor when he saw her arm sticking out of a pile of hay. Tears flooded his eyes again as he walked towards her. He knelt down and began to clear the hay from Samantha's body. Her clothes were torn apart but they were still hanging on her. Jess sobbed uncontrollably. She had been beaten to a pulp and shot. Her face was bruised and bloodied and there was a single bullet hole in the middle of her forehead. "Samantha...oh Samantha," he sobbed.

He picked her up and carried her body out of the barn. A large clump of her brain matter remained on the ground. As he stepped outside, he stopped for a moment and looked out towards his pa's body. He went around to the front of the house and up the steps and laid his sister's body gently down on the porch. Then, he sat down on the steps of the porch, laid his face on his arms, and sobbed for what seemed like an eternity. He couldn't believe that this was happening. He wondered if this was just a bad dream and he would wake up soon. *How could anyone do something like this? His ma had never hurt anyone. And Samantha? What could she possibly have done to deserve this? This just can't be happening.* He thought all of these things and could not understand why. He would wake up soon and find out he had fallen asleep by the big boulder by the creek. That had to be it. *Please let it be a dream*, he thought.

He wasn't sure if he had fallen asleep or was simply still in a daze when he began to hear the sound of a horse galloping. He lifted his head as Sheriff Diggs stopped his horse in front of the house and dismounted. As soon as Sheriff Diggs hit the ground he knew things were bad. He had already seen Samantha's body lying motionless on the porch and heard Jess sobbing uncontrollably before he dismounted. He ran up the steps of the front porch to get to Samantha's body to see if there was any chance that she was alive. There wasn't.

"My God, Jess. What the hell happened here?" Jess couldn't speak. He just sobbed more loudly. Sheriff Diggs could find no pulse or signs of breathing from Samantha. He still had his hand on Samantha's neck checking for any pulse when he asked Jess, "where is your father, Jess?"

Jess lifted his head, tears still streaming from his eyes. He slowly pointed towards the east field where he had found his pa. The sheriff saw the horse with the plow just sitting still out in the middle of the field. He could just barely make out what looked like a body on the ground behind the horse and plow. He began to head down the steps to run out to check where Jess was pointing but before he got to the bottom step, Jess grabbed the sheriff's arm and stopped him in his tracks. The sheriff knelt down and put his hand on Jess's shoulder. "I've got to go out there."

Jess looked at the sheriff and shook his head as if to say no. He nodded his head slightly back and to the right. "Inside," Jess said, so low that the sheriff didn't catch what he had said for a second or two. "Ma," Jess said weakly.

The sheriff started back up the steps to look inside the house. As he opened the screen door, he gasped, and then froze. He stopped breathing for several seconds and then he slowly let the air out of his lungs. "Jesus God damn Christ," he said under his breath. He glanced back out at Jess still sitting on the steps, his head back down on his arms that were crossed on his knees. His sobbing had slowed considerable. The sheriff fought back tears that welled up in his eyes and his throat felt like he had tried to swallow an apple whole. Becky was like a daughter to him. He wanted to rush over and cut her down and yet, years of experience as a sheriff reminded him that he still had to survey the scene for any clues before he did anything else. He walked towards her but stopped abruptly. He noticed boot prints in the blood on the floor. There were three distinct sets of boot prints. He noticed something odd about one of the boot prints. Some of the boot prints were made from a boot with a heel missing. *A left heel*. He scanned the rest of the room and spotted the murder weapon. A large kitchen knife covered with blood lay on the floor of the kitchen area, about ten feet from the body. There were no boot prints in that area so the sheriff surmised that it had been thrown over there. He walked over to the body. Another wave of sadness along with sheer

hatred for the people responsible for this pulsed through his body, stopping him in his tracks again. If he ever found them he would just shoot them where they stood. No trial. Then he would drag their bodies out in the woods and let the buzzards and coyotes pick their bones clean. They deserved nothing less.

He walked closer to Becky and squeezed past her to get around to the back of her body. When he got behind the body, he looked up at the nails and rope that tied her to the doorway. He decided to cut the body down. He went inside Becky's sleeping room and got a large blanket. He wrapped it around the body as best he could and reached down and pulled out the knife he always kept in his right boot. He carefully cut down Becky's body and placed it on her bed. He grabbed another blanket and made sure that she was completely covered. He grabbed another blanket to cover Samantha's body outside.

He walked back outside and Jess was still sitting on the steps. He gently placed the blanket on Samantha. Jess had stopped crying and had lifted his head up, looking out across the ranch towards the main road. The sheriff touched Jess's shoulder as he went down the steps and headed out to the field where John's body was. As he got close to the body he noticed one set of footprints going in both directions. They were made from the same boots with the left heel missing. He looked over the body and surmised that whoever had done this had shot John with a rifle from a distance and then walked up and finished him with a few shots from a pistol. John's body was behind the plow and there was no evidence that it had been dragged there. Surely if he had seen anyone coming up the ranch road he would have walked towards the house to see who it was. He probably never saw it coming. The sheriff walked back to front of the house and looked at the footprints. Near as he could tell, there had been three men. He found the prints from the boot with the missing heel again. He turned to walk over to the steps again and when he looked up at Jess, he was startled by what he saw.

Jess stared straight ahead with a look that would have killed most men. It was a look the sheriff had seen more than once in his lifetime and it was not a look that should be on any boy's face. He walked back up the steps, and sat next to Jess again, putting his arm around him. He knew there was nothing he could say or do to comfort Jess, so he just sat there with his arm around him for a while. While the sheriff sat there he thought about what he had to do next. He wanted to hit the trail and look for these murderers, but he would have to go into town and get some help. The blood on the floor was mostly dry except for the thick puddle that was around Becky's feet, so they had a good head start. And, there were three of them so he knew he was no match for them without help. He decided that he would load up the bodies in the wagon and take them and Jess to town. He would put Jess up at the town's only hotel for the night, or maybe Jim Smythe would take him in for a few days. In any case, he knew he had to break the blank stare that Jess still had. The sheriff could only imagine what thoughts could be going through the boy's head.

"Jess?" There was no response. "Jess?" He asked a little louder. Jess still did not respond. "Jess, I have to take the bodies into town, and you have to go with me too."

Jess slowly turned his head to look at the sheriff. His voice was broken and quivering badly.

"Why would anyone want to kill my ma and pa, and little Samantha? Why? What sort of people would do this?"

The sheriff knew that there was no logical explanation he could give a fourteen-year-old boy that would make any sense, and yet, he had to tell him something.

"There are a lot of good people in this world, Jess. Unfortunately, there are some really bad people too. All too many people who kill just for the sake of killing. Sometimes just for the thrill of it. It never makes any sense, no matter how old you get or how many times you see it. It's just the world we live in today." Jess looked away from the sheriff and looked straight out at nothing again.

"Jess, why don't you sit here while I go get the horse loose from the plow and stable him?" Jess nodded affirmatively.

The sheriff walked out into the field and unhitched the plow horse. When he was finished, he met Jess back at the front porch and told Jess to put the horse in the barn and feed the stock. He figured that would give him enough time to load the bodies into the wagon without him being around. He quickly unloaded the supplies from the wagon and loaded up Becky and Samantha. Then he drove the wagon out to John's body and loaded him. Becky and Samantha had been easy, but John was a pretty stocky man and the sheriff nearly put his back out getting him into the wagon. He had gotten enough blankets from the house to cover all the bodies. Jess was coming out from the stables when the sheriff got back to the front porch.

"Time to go, Jess," the sheriff said. Jess nodded as he looked in the back of wagon at the three bodies that were covered up. Jess crawled up the wagon and took his seat next to the sheriff. As he sat down he looked at the boot prints in the soft dirt in front of the house. And then, he noticed something odd. He noticed a left boot print. A left boot print with a missing boot heel.

It was a long ride back to town. Jess never said a word. He kept going over and over in his mind what had happened. He thought about the boot print with the missing left heel. *Was it from the same boot that belonged to one of the three drifters he had met along the road into town this morning? It had to be. How many people run around with a boot heel missing? Did these men kill his family because he had gotten smart with them? Could he be responsible for their deaths?* He actually groaned at the thought of that and the sheriff looked over at him but said nothing. He pictured the three men again in his mind. He never wanted to forget what they looked like. He would burn their images into his brain and remember everything he could about them. It was getting close to dusk when they pulled into town. The sheriff stopped the wagon in front of the General store. Jim had come out to the porch to see what the sheriff was doing driving a wagon back to town with Jess. The sheriff explained what had happened and Jim fought back tears.

“Jim,” the sheriff asked, “can you take their bodies over to the undertaker? I need to get Jess here set up for the night. Then I need to round up some men for a posse to head out at first light and hunt down the bastards that did this.”

“Of course, Sheriff,” replied Jim, “whatever you need. You going to put him up at the hotel?”

“Yeah. Just for a few days until I can sort all this out,” the sheriff said.

“Sheriff, I got a better idea. Why don’t you take the bodies over to the undertaker and let Sara and me take care of Jess? We have that extra room upstairs. He could stay there. Sara can watch over him, our room is only ten feet away. We could keep a close eye on him that way.”

“Jim that would be right nice of you to do that. I’m sure he would be better off here than at the hotel. You sure your wife won’t mind?”

“Not to worry. Becky was like a daughter to her and Jess is like family to us. We’d be more than happy to look after him,” said Jim.

“Jess,” asked the sheriff, “would you rather stay with Jim and Sara?”

Jess shook his head affirming that it was okay with him. He too had always considered Jim and Sara as family. He looked in the back of the wagon as he stepped down from it. There was no crying but you could see tears coming from his eyes.

“I’m tired,” Jess said, barely audible.

“You go on in and Sara will fix you some supper, Jess,” said Jim.

“I’m not hungry. I just want to go to sleep.”

“That’s okay, Jess. Whatever you want.”

“Sara!” Jim called out to his wife.

“I’m right here,” she said softly, tears streaming from her eyes also. “I’ve been standing here all this time. Jess, you come on in and I’ll set up your bed right away, okay?”

Jess nodded and followed Sara up the stairs and watched her fix up the bed for him. He remembered watching his ma fix the beds after he had brought the sheets in from the outside after drying.

“You go ahead and get comfortable. I’ll get you a glass of water just in case you get thirsty later.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Jess said politely. He got undressed and got into bed. The sheets felt clean and cool to him and yet they did not comfort him. Sara brought him a glass of water and set it down on a little table next to the bed. She put her hand on his head just for a moment as if to let him know that she would be right there if he needed anything.

Sara closed the door most of the way leaving it open just enough so that she could hear him in the night. Jess lay there thinking about all that happened. He couldn’t stop asking himself why something so terrible could happen? *Who was responsible? Was he responsible?* He slowly started to doze off. Just before he fell off to sleep, he imagined that he was hunting down the killers who had murdered his family and that he would kill every last one of them. And he would make them suffer