

Prologue

May 17, 1949

Pulling the patrol car off Mill Creek Road into the weed-infested driveway, Sheriff Bob Curry said a silent prayer. "Lord, they don't need this right now. You know the Browns have enough trouble." He sighed and switched off the engine.

Someone was watching; the curtains moved in the front window. Normally such an action would make him wary, but not today. The Browns were harmless. He hated death notices, especially this one. He felt like it was his fault their son Dennis was dead. He was the one who had suggested old man Miller press charges.

"You know, Sheriff, that fence ain't worth much. A little paint might do it some good." Miller said.

"Well, with the words the young scalawag put on there, it's gonna have to be painted." Curry said, wagging his head. "Tell you what. I know the Browns can't afford the paint so I'll see if the county can spring for it and we'll let Dennis cool his heels in jail for a couple of days while he paints your fence."

So the deal had been struck and now Dennis was dead.

The front door opened and Katy Brown stepped out on the rickety porch. She clutched her threadbare robe to herself with one hand and held onto the peeling railing with the other. Her mother's eyes searched the interior of the car. Opening the door, Bob walked across the unmowed lawn.

"Morning, Mrs. Brown." he said, squinting up at the gray haired woman.

"Where's Denny? I thought you said he finished the fence yesterday."

"Well, yes ma'am, he did."

"Then why ain't he with ye, you said you'd bring him by in time for school and it's nigh onto 10 o'clock."

"I'm sorry Mrs. Brown. I've got some bad news for you. Can I come and talk to you and Don?"

"Now, Sheriff you know wells I do that fight weren't Denny's fault. Them big boys at the jail goaded him into takin' the first swing. You ain't gonna hold him because of that, are ye?" She stood to the side to let him enter. Taking off his hat, Bob ducked his head and stepped into the shabby living room. Don Brown set on the couch, his face lined with pain.

"How's the back this morning, Don?" Bob asked.

"Not good, I didn't get much sleep last night with it a painin me."

Taking a deep breath, Curry said "Well folks, there's no easy way to say it, Dennis hung himself last night. The night man found him about five o'clock this morning. We tried to bring him back, but it was too late."

"You're a funnen us." Don said, tears misting his eyes.

"You're wrong, it's gotta be some other boy. Denny wouldn't do that. Not over some rickety old fence." Katy Brown said.

"I'm sorry. There's no mistake. It's Dennis alright." Bob said, turning his hat by the brim.

"NO, NO, NO!" Katie screamed. "Not my baby! No!" She collapsed on the couch with tears streaming down her cheeks.

Don raised his cane and pointed it shakily at the sheriff. "You mark my words, somebody killed my boy. If'n I was half the man I used to be, I'd be down at that jail and I'd find out who they is."

They laid Denny out in the living room in a pine box made by his Uncle Jimmy. Uncomfortable going to the home again, Bob waited on the road while they loaded the casket into an old station wagon. When they pulled out of the yard, he turned on the bubble and led the small procession down the mile and a half to the small cemetery where Denny's granddaddy and grandma lay.

After they put Denny in the ground, Jimmy came to him. They had known each other for a long time, Curry on one side of the law and Jimmy on the other. As much as he tried, Jimmy could not overcome the alcohol.

"What are you doing here, Sheriff?" Jimmy said, bringing his face inches from Bob's. The smell of cheap beer was overpowering.

"I came to pay my respects."

"If'n you had respect, Denny wouldn't be in that box." Jimmy took a step closer, his nose almost touching the sheriff's face.

"Go home, Jimmy. I don't want to have to arrest you today." Turning away, Bob opened the door to his patrol car.

"This ain't over sheriff. No sir, this ain't over by a long shot."

Jimmy stared at the patrol car until it disappeared over the hill.

Chapter 1

The man glanced at his watch and cursed softly. If he didn't leave soon, he would be trapped. This was the latest he had waited. The preacher always came to his office in the church before daybreak, letting his wife and daughter sleep while he studied the Bible. Yet for the last two days, his murderer had waited. In another twenty minutes, the sun would be up. Gray light streaked through the cathedralstyle windows, casting shadows from the old wood pews onto the floor, causing snakes to appear in the man's mind.

"This place is creepy. I'll be glad to be out of here." he whispered. Even his voice seemed out of place.

In the parsonage, a lone light burned. The sweet sense of roses wafted in the open windows to mix with the odor of fresh brewed coffee. The light of a gorgeous sunrise was becoming stronger. The man paced the aisles, pausing every few minutes to stare at the little house across the churchyard.

One painful memory kept recurring in his mind, causing him to shiver. As a small child, he would hide in his secret place. Barely moving, waiting for hours trying to avoid a beating from his father. To pass the time, he would play games in his mind. He did that now, running over again and again the killing of Denny Brown. Yet this was the third night in a row he had waited in the darkness. With each passing moment, the danger of being discovered became greater.

What if that stupid preacher talked? If Jim told someone, they would arrest him.

Even if by some miracle he didn't go to prison, his life would be ruined.

If only he hadn't been drinking that night... if only he'd kept his mouth shut. The death of Dennis Brown weighed on his mind; he felt like he had to tell somebody and pastors were supposed to keep everything you said to themselves in confidence. He tried to explain to the preacher that it was an accident. He never meant to kill Dennis. Mays gave him an ultimatum: go to the Sheriff or else he would.

Well, it was too late for that now. Last Monday, he saw Pastor Jim sneaking around the jail talking to Curry. He tried to weasel it out of the sheriff but Curry just smiled and said it had something to do with the church. They could try to fool him, but he knew, yes sir he knew. The voices began in his head again. He was tempted to answer them, but that would just start an argument. There was only one way to handle the problem. He rose and stretched his cramped muscles. He paced the aisle, always staying in the shadows. That is where he had been his whole life, living in the shadows.

In the parsonage, Kristie Mays poured herself a second cup of coffee. Adding sugar and cream, she smiled at her husband.

"Which way should we go?" she asked, looking over Jim's right shoulder.

Her heart-shaped face glowed with excitement. Smoothing the crinkled map, Jim replied, "I would like to take the scenic route through Illinois, then across the river at Hudsonville and go south but it'll cut out several miles if we go on Hwy 41. I need to be back by seven to put the finishing touches on my sermon."

"Honey, you work too hard. Please try to slow down this summer," Kristie said, massaging his back and shoulders.

"I'll try, sweetheart," Jim said, turning to take her in his arms. "If you promise to do the same."

"Hey I asked you first!" Kristie said, smiling. She pushed herself back and her fingers danced across Jim's ribs.

Jim dropped the map he was folding and made a grab for her, his hands closing on empty air.

It took five times through the house to catch her, but when he did, Jim was unmerciful. He tickled until she was screaming. Kristie tried unsuccessfully to defend herself.

"I give, I give," she cried between tears and laughter, their signal she had had enough.

Pulling Kristie to her feet, Jim wrapped his arms around her.

"Oh honey, I'm so glad I married you. I love you so much," she said, burying her head in his chest.

"I'm glad you did too, sweetheart," Jim whispered, kissing her lightly. "I love you."

"Last night was wonderful, the dinner was magnificent, the moonlight walk. How do think Emily will react when the baby comes in December?"

"She'll love him, like she does everybody."

"Hey, how do you know it's going to be a boy?"

"Because I asked God for a son," Jim said grinning, patting Kristy's abdomen. "My own little preacher boy."

The man cringed at the laughter in the parsonage. He hated it when people laughed. He knew he was the butt of their jokes.

He rose and stretched his cramped muscles. He would be back tonight. Maybe the preacher would work late. He wished there was some other way but he had already committed one murder. What was one more?

He was about to sneak out of the church when he heard the parsonage screen door slam.

Diving deeper into the shadows, he looked out the side window at the parsonage. Yes, there came Jim strolling across the adjoining lawns, whistling a tune the man recognized from his childhood.

He snorted.

"'Amazing Grace,' yea, you're gonna need amazing grace this morning," he said to himself as he eased the hunting knife out of its sheath.

Reverend James Mays, "Pastor Jim" to his congregation, loved pastoring Elm Grove Community Church. The county people were so kind and hard working yet they always had time for the Lord. Jim's blonde hair and blue eyes were a perfect match for his wife Kristie, and six year old daughter, Emily. Some of his people jokingly said they "look like an advertisement for a popular brand of hair coloring". His patient gentle manner made him a perfect match for the laid-back country church.

Jim smiled, what a great day to be alive. The warm rising sun felt good on his face. The light filtered through the tall oak trees behind the church. With their daughter staying with her grandparents last night, he and Kristy had been able to spend a rare night alone. His dear little wife went all out creating a superb meal. His favorite: pork chops, corn, baked potato, green

beans and apple pie. Afterwards they strolled hand in hand down the road in the light of a full moon. As they passed her parents house, they heard Emily singing.

Jesus loves me, this I know

For the Bible tells me so

Little ones to Him belong

They are weak but He is strong.

Yes, Jesus loves me

Yes, Jesus loves me

Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so.

Husband and wife, mother and father listened quietly, smiling in the moonlight. And before the end of the year he would be a father again. What a great Christmas gift.

As Jim reached for the doorknob, Kristie called, "Hon, don't forget the cooler. It's in the closet of your Sunday School room."

"Okay, dear." Turning, Jim saw a flash in the sun and felt a sharp agonizing pain in his chest.

"Ahhhhhhhh!" he screamed. In shock and disbelief, he saw his murderer withdraw back into the church.

Looking out the kitchen window, Kristie saw her husband fall to the ground.

She dropped the plate she was washing and it shattered on the floor. 'Heart attack.' The thought ripped through her mind. Tearing out of the kitchen, she screamed. "Jim, Jim, oh, dear Lord help him." Running to his side, she dropped to her knees and cradled her dying husband in her arms. Noticing the blood flowing from his chest, she screamed in horror. She never saw the man step from the church, nor did she see him raise the hunting knife. He brought it down, stabbing Kristie again and again in the back. She fell across her husband, their blood mingling.

"How much longer will they be, Gram?" six-year-old Emily asked for the third time in as many minutes. Her eager blue eyes shone up at her grandmother. She hugged the doll close to herself.

"Soon, honey, soon," Ruth Johnson said absent-mindedly as she washed the breakfast dishes. She kept her face turned away, trying hide her worried expression from the little girl. From where she stood, she could see the spire of the Elm Grove Community Church rising over the sea of corn.

"Why is it taking so long? Mommy and Daddy are going to see Mrs. Skinner this morning before we go to the zoo," Emily said. "She's been sick you know."

Emily liked Mrs. Skinner. Whenever Daddy and Mommy would let her visit with them, she always gave Emily a cookie and a glass of ice-cold milk.

"Yes dear, I know. Emily, why don't you watch for Mommy and Daddy on the front porch? You can sit on the swing, but wait till Daddy stops the car before you run to them, okay?"

"Okay Gram."

Emily picked up her Bible storybook, hugging it to her. It was the one with the pictures of all the animals including the two lions going into the Ark. She struggled to carry both her doll and the book. Today at the zoo, she would see a real lion. Daddy had promised her, and Daddy always kept his promises.

Carefully shutting the wooden screen door so it wouldn't slam, Emily perched on the edge of the swing so she could run to her parents right away; after Daddy had stopped the car of course.

Watching her granddaughter, Ruth stepped to the back door.

"Jack, something's wrong. They should have been here forty five minutes ago," Ruth said, concern lining her face.

Avoiding his wife's eyes, Samuel "Jack" Johnson continued to whittle on the axe handle he was making to replace the one broken last week.

A tall, muscular man in his mid fifties, his white hair and lined face made him look older.

"Now dear, they probably just got delayed, or maybe they had another sick call to make." Jack tried to sound convincing but he couldn't shake the horrible feeling he had had all morning. It reminded him of the day Rickie died.

"It's not like Kristie and Jim not to call if they were delayed. They know how much Emily's been looking forward to this."

"I'll call the Skinners. Maybe Mary has taken a turn for the worse," Jack said, laying aside the handle. Stepping into the kitchen, he picked up the receiver on the old wall phone and spun the crank.

"Harriett, get me the Skinners, would you please?" he said into the mouthpiece.

"I'll be happy to Jack. How is everybody at your house this fine summer day?"

"We're kinda worried. Kristie and Jim were supposed to pick up Emily an hour ago. You haven't heard anything from them, have you?"

"No, I haven't, Jack. Let me know if you hear from them. I hope everything's alright."

"I'm sure he just probably got to talking."

"I'll connect you, Jack."

"Thank you, Harriett."

The Skinners answered on the first ring.

"Bill, how's Mary doing this morning?" Jack asked when Skinner picked up the receiver.

"Oh she's doing a lot better, thank you. Are Pastor Jim and Kristie going to stop by before they go to the zoo?" Bill Skinner asked.

"Why? Haven't they been there yet?" Jack asked, his anger rising.

"No. I hope everything is alright." Bill said.

"They're probably still at the house."

"I called but there was no answer," Bill said. "Maybe they're over at the church."

"I'll drive down and see. Thanks, Bill."

Jack slammed the phone back on its hook before Bill could answer.

"What's wrong?" Ruth asked, nervously wiping her dry hands on her apron.

"That stupid son-in-law of yours is still fooling around at the church. I told Kristie not to marry a preacher. You stay here with Emily. I'm going to have a talk with him!"

"Now Jack, take it easy," Ruth said. Her words were lost on him as Jack was already out the door and halfway to his old pickup. Starting the engine, he carefully backed out of the driveway, keeping an eye on his granddaughter on the front porch. On the short drive to the church, he tried to calm himself. He never wanted Kristie to marry a preacher in the first place; all they cared about was money.

Pulling into the driveway of the parsonage, Jack parked behind Jim and Kristie's green Buick. Glancing into the open trunk, he saw it was crammed almost to capacity with balls, bats, blankets, and a picnic basket.

After hammering on the front door and receiving no response, Jack walked into the living room.

"Jim! Kristie! Where are you?"

No answer!

As Jack called out, he became increasingly apprehensive. The house was strangely quiet. Going to the kitchen, he noticed the table still littered with dirty dishes and the coffee pot still on. Jack's apprehension turned to fear. Kristie, a flawless housekeeper like her mother, would never have left her kitchen that way. His heart jumped into his throat when he saw the shattered dish on the floor. Opening the back door, he saw the two figures lying on the ground at the back door of the church. A cry tore from his throat like a wounded animal.

"Kristie! No, no! Kristie!" he screamed. Kneeling beside his daughter, he gently turned her over. The back of her white blouse was soaked in blood. His heart breaking, Jack held her in his arms. Her eyes opened slightly and she searched his face, smiling weakly.

"Dad, is that you? Please tell me, is Jim alive?" she asked.

Laying her gently on the ground, Jack said, "Hold on honey, I'll be right back."

Feeling Jim's wrist for a pulse and finding none, Jack stumbled into the house.

Whirling the crank, he cried into the phone, "Harriett, send an ambulance and the Sheriff down to the church! Hurry!"

Not waiting for an answer, he slammed the phone onto the hook and ran out of the house.

Flying across the yard, Jack picked up Kristie and cradled her head in his lap. He made no attempt to stop the tears from flowing down his cheeks.

"Dad, how's Jim?" Kristie asked again, weaker this time.

"He's gone, isn't he?" she said, her eyes filling with tears.

"Yes, honey, I'm sorry, he is."

"Dad, tell mom I love her. Please take care of Emily."

"Of course, we'll keep her with us till you're out of the hospital."

"No Dad, the Lord is taking me home. I can feel it. Dad, turn your life over to Christ. He's the only one who can comfort you and Mom."

Jack swallowed, unable to answer. Looking beyond him, Kristie smiled. "Yes. I'm ready," she said, her eyes taking on a heavenly light.

Glancing behind him, Jack saw no one.

Turning back to her father, Kristie said, "Dad I love you. Jim and I will be waiting for you, Mom and Emily on Heaven's shore." Her voice trailed off and her body became limp.

Sobbing, Jack hugged Kristie. He was still hugging her when the ambulance arrived, followed quickly by the sheriff.

Twenty years ago, Bob Curry had joined Elm Grove Community Church; now, seeing his pastor and Kristie lying dead, a rage went through him he had never experienced before. Motioning to one of the deputies to take Jack aside, he started barking orders.

"I want tape up all around the church, parsonage, car, everything! I don't care if you have to go to Evansville to get more! Nobody, and I mean nobody, goes in or out without my say so! Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," the three deputies echoed at once.

At that moment, a figure streaked past. The deputy nearest the church made a grab, but missed. Breathing hard, her gray hair in disarray, Ruth ran to where Jim and Kristie lay covered in blankets.

Before the ambulance attendants could stop her, she had pulled the blankets back. Looking into their dead faces, she fainted.

When she came to, a tall lanky man in a white uniform was leaning over her waving smelling salts under her nose. Picking her up, Jack hugged her to his chest.

For the next few moments, Jack and Ruth held each other as their world collapsed around them. Finally Ruth tried to stifle her sobs and lifting her tear stained face to her husband, she said, "Jack, I left Emily on the front porch. She saw the police cars and ambulance; we have to tell her."

"Can't we wait?" Jack said.

"Oh honey, I wish we could. I know the Lord himself will comfort her as only He can," Ruth sobbed. "We have to tell her."

She started to say more but the words caught in her throat.

"God!" Jack snorted. "What kind of god takes a little girl's parents and makes her an orphan?"

Ruth had no answer for her husband; at least nothing he would believe.

"Harris!" Bob Curry called to his chief deputy. "Run these folks home."

"Jack, I'll have one of the men drop off your pickup later. We'll get your statement at that time." Sheriff Curry said, laying his hand on Jack's shoulder. "We're gonna get this guy Jack. Believe me, we're gonna get him."

"You better Bob, because if I find him, I'll kill him with my bare hands," Jack said, tears still streaming down his ruddy cheeks.

Hearing the door open, Emily lifted her head. Smiling, she asked, "Gramps, they'll be here soon, won't they? I hope we can see all the animals but I 'specially want to see the lions."

Falling on the couch, Ruth buried her face in her hands, tears running between her fingers. Laying her book on the floor, Emily ran to her grandmother and threw her tiny arms around her neck. She cooed softly, "Gram, Gram, don't cry. I don't want to see any old lion. I'll tell Mommy and Daddy I want to stay with you and Gramps instead. Don't cry."

Tears again flooded Jack's eyes as his thoughts returned to the loss of his son.

For years, he had worked to own his own farm. Building it up, he was very proud of his accomplishment.

The year Rickie was born, they brought in a bumper crop and paid off the mortgage. The fall of that year, they put up the new barn. Things were going so well, he even let Ruth talk him into attending church occasionally.

"Too much religion can spoil your life" became Jack's favorite saying. Neither Ruth nor the pastor could change his mind. As soon as Rickie could walk, Jack took him everywhere, first to town for supplies, then to the barn to do chores, and finally to the fields on his fifth birthday. Rickie and Jack became inseparable. To see the tall man was to see the small boy.

Jack would never forget that day in the spring of '31 no matter how hard he tried. It was still too wet to work the fields.

"Ruth, I'm going to take down the oak by the south pasture gate before it falls on the fence," Jack stated that fateful April morning.

"Don't take Rickie this morning; he might get in the way."

"Now Ruth, don't worry, I'll watch him. If he's gonna be a farmer, he has to learn."

Turning away, Jack gave Rickie the task of carrying their lunch.

Beaming, Rickie said, "Daddy and I are gonna have a picnic."

Ruth watched until they disappeared behind the barn, the tiny boy carrying the sandwiches and fruit for their lunch as he struggled to match paces with the tall man carrying an ax, water jug and saw.

As Ruth mopped the kitchen floor, she prayed that the Lord would help her reflect the love of Christ to her husband. She had just finished her chore and was relaxing with a cup of warmed-over coffee when she heard a bone-chilling scream. Dropping the cup, she flung open the back door. Jack ran full speed in the direction of the house, carrying something wrapped in his denim jacket. He stumbled and fell. He held the bundle in his outstretched arms, protecting it from hitting the ground. Regaining his footing, he ran on, his long legs eating up the distance.

"Ruth!" Jack screamed, "Ruth, please help!"

Ruth flew across the back yard, almost colliding with him in the cornfield. Laying Rickie gently on the ground, Jack unwrapped the coat from his face. Rickie's eyes were closed and blood seeped from his ears, nose, and mouth.

"I couldn't stop it! I couldn't stop it, I couldn't stop it! I tried to, but it was too late!" Jack moaned over and over, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"What happened?" Ruth asked as pain ripped through her heart. She reached out her hand and caressed Rickie's already cold face.

"I made sure Rickie was out of the way. I always do, you know that, Ruth. But just as the tree started to fall a baby rabbit ran under it and Rickie followed it. I couldn't stop the tree from falling; I just stood there like a fool."

After he arrived, Doc Prichard said, "Rickie's neck was broken - he never knew what hit him."

And after the funeral, Ruth steered him away from the small grave, saying, "It's not your fault, Jack. No one could have loved Rickie more than you did."

Jack refused to be comforted. For months, Ruth would wake in the middle of the night to hear the rocking chair seesawing on the porch, or see Jack's shadow walking the fields and pasture in the moonlight. One morning she waited for him until the breakfast eggs were cold. Going to the barn, she found Jack halfway through his chores staring with unseeing eyes at the field over which he had carried Rickie's body.

Laying her hand on his arm, she said, "Honey, I know it's hard, but we have to remember our little boy is in God's heaven right now running and playing just like he did here on earth!"

Jack dropped the full bucket of milk, its contents splattering his shoes and legs as he whirled on Ruth.

"Don't you ever mention God to me again!" he shouted, pointing a shaking finger in her face. "I don't want anything to do with a God who kills a child." Turning on his heel, he stomped into the woods behind the barn. Ruth spent the rest of the day in prayer, listening for his footsteps but not hearing them until nightfall.

Two years later, Kristie was born. Her presence was like a salve to soothe their troubled hearts; she was such a sweet child. However, Ruth's fears that Jack would spoil her soon proved unfounded. Ruth made sure that Kristie attended church every Sunday and said her prayers before meals and at bedtime.

She read Bible stories to her until Kristie could read for herself. Ruth could hardly contain her joy the day ten-year-old Kristie received Christ as her Saviour. As she matured, it became apparent to anyone who came in contact with her that Kristie's beauty wasn't just skin deep, but radiated with a heart full of love for Christ and those around her.