

THE SILENT SCREAM
BY
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CHAPTER ONE

Richard bounced across the rough field on his motorcycle toward home. He peered in the direction of the front door and wondered why his mother hadn't poked her head out and waved as she usually did when he arrived. She must be busy over the stove, he thought, wheeling into the barn yard.

He jumped off the bike and glanced up at the roof of the house. No smoke curled out of the pipe vent connected to the wood burning stove. That worried him.

Quickly pushing the bike into the barn, he dusted off his jeans and hurried toward the back door. Sniffing the air, he thought it odd that he couldn't smell any food cooking. Mom always had something going on the stove that made his mouth water.

His dog Ruffy hadn't run to greet him either. As he raced up the rickety

wooden steps, he glanced quickly under the raised back porch for his large Golden Retriever, but didn't see him. Giving his seat one more dusting, he opened the squeaky screen.

Richard had no more stepped into the kitchen than he staggered backwards against the door jam. He sucked in his breath as he stared in horror at his mother's body sprawled on the floor in a pool of blood. And Ruffy's furry body lay beside her, blood still flowing from the slit in his throat.

He swallowed hard, then forced himself forward, stretching out his arm so that only the tips of his trembling fingers touched his mother's cold, lifeless body. As the smell of death invaded his nostrils, the taste of bile bubbled into his throat

Richard clutched his stomach and stumbled back outside where he leaned over the wooden railing and vomited until his insides ached from the dry heaves. Tears blurred his vision and sobs wracked his whole being. Who would do this horrible thing to his beautiful mother and gentle dog?

He took a deep breath and turned back toward the entry. Maybe what he'd seen was no more than a horrible figment of his imagination. He eased open the door, shot a quick look inside, then slammed it shut. His breath came in ragged spurts as he leaned his forehead against the hard wood. No, dear God. .it really had happened. His mother and dog were motionless..

Fear slithered down his spine. Could the killer still be in the area? He whirled around and scanned the grounds. Having just come from the empty barn, he glanced toward the chicken coop. The hens were scampering about

and pecking the ground as if nothing had happened. He chewed on his lip as a chill rippled through his body.

His first thought was to take his gun and search the countryside until he found the murderer. He started to go inside, but stopped in his tracks. The idea of having to step over his mother's body to get to his room made him shiver. Instead, he stumbled down the steps and ran to the side door. Even though it was locked, he yanked and pulled on the knob, grunting loudly as the tears flowed down his cheeks. Adrenalin surged through his veins as he dashed around the corner of the house to his room's window. He grabbed the screen and ripped it off with his bare hands. Fortunately, the window was open a crack. He wedged his fingers under the rotting wood, heaved it upward and climbed inside.

Leaping to his feet, he stared through the open door of his room which faced the kitchen. The sight of his mother's long black hair flowing across the wooden floor made him feel weak. He quickly shut the door and stood for several minutes, his head resting against the unyielding wood. Hot tears dropped onto his hands.

His eyes squeezed shut, he whipped around and leaned his back against the door. Within a few minutes, he rubbed his sleeve across his nose and took several deep breaths before snatching his twenty-two from the closet. He rummaged in his dresser drawer for a box of shells. How he wished he still had his dad's shotgun. But before his dad had died, he'd insisted that Uncle Joe take that gun along with a couple of others for safe keeping until Richard

turned eighteen.

He doubted he'd ever see those weapons again since Uncle Joe had gone back to the Midwest and taken everything with him, including the guns. No one had heard from him since. Of course, dad couldn't have foreseen this horrible incident and what his son would have to face alone. But Richard sure as hell wished Uncle Joe was here now.

Before hunting for the killer, he needed help. The only people he knew well were the Zankers. Richard's family didn't have a phone, so he'd have to ride his motorcycle. The Zanker's ranch started at the bottom of the hill and extended for miles in every direction. Their ranch house was located at the far end, which must be at least ten miles away. There were no two ways about it. He had to go, regardless of how far he had to ride. Grabbing his jacket and clipping the shoulder strap to his gun, he hurried to the barn where he filled the motorcycle with gas. He snapped the gun strap across his chest and over one shoulder so that the twenty-two fit snugly against his back. Throwing his leg over the seat, he started the motorcycle and headed out. Instead of traveling across the pasture, he drove straight for the road, silently praying.

Richard rode for what seemed like hours. Even though the night air seemed cool, he felt hot and feverish. When he finally turned up the long winding road leading to the Zanker's ranch, his heart plummeted. There were no visible lights inside the house. He dashed up the steps to the large front porch and pounded on the door, but received no answer. Not even the dogs raced around the house to greet him. He stood for a moment searching the

property for any signs of life. They must have left on a trip, taking their German shepherds with them.

Then a wave of fear surged through him. Had they suffered the same fate as his mother and dog? He frantically tried to see in the windows at the front, but they were all covered with heavy drapes to block out the sun. Racing around to the back side of the house, he looked in every uncurtained window on the way and saw nothing out of the ordinary. When he reached the back door and could see through the large window to the kitchen, he breathed a sigh of relief that everything appeared clean and spotless. He returned to the front yard with a heavy heart. No one here to help. Who could he get? He didn't know anyone in the Copco Lake area, only the boy he'd biked with on occasion up in the hills. He didn't even know his name, much less where he lived. There were no homes to his knowledge between his house and the Zankers. Klamath Falls would be too far to ride tonight. He felt frustrated and confused, unsure of what to do.

Richard gave a reluctant look at the Zanker house and climbed back on his cycle. He made a wide U-turn in the driveway and rode toward home. When he finally reached the road to his house, he cut across the field to the barn, then suddenly, he remembered the lone man who lived in that one room shanty up the road. He made a sharp turn and sped up the hill. But, to his dismay, he found the house dark and deserted. He'd have to try to get help early in the morning. Maybe he'd even find someone on the road. By the time he finally got back to his house and parked the bike in the barn, the moon shone high in

the sky. He closed the big wooden door and walked slowly toward the house.

Hesitantly, he pulled open the side door that he'd unlocked and stepped into the hall that led to his room. The foul odor of blood bit into his nostrils. Sweat beaded his forehead and upper lip. He entered his room, sat down on the bed and studied the closed door leading into the kitchen. Placing the gun across his lap, he stared through the window at the moon shadowed yard.

Several hours later, Richard awakened with a start. The twenty-two still clutched in his hand, he slid quietly off the bed and dropped to his knees. The wooden floor beneath him quivered slightly, as if an animal had run across the planks.

He jumped to his feet and flung open the kitchen door. Letting out a cry like a wounded animal, he aimed his gun, shot repeatedly and found he'd killed three rats trying to make a meal of his mother and dog.

He also noticed the sun's rays beginning to filter through the kitchen window, exposing blow flies buzzing the room. Knowing the bodies of his mother and dog couldn't stay in the kitchen any longer, he shrugged on his jacket and headed for the barn. He had to bury them now.

Leaning his gun in the corner, he dragged a shovel and pick to the small creek that ran near the house. Richard's mom had a special old oak tree where she loved to sit with Ruffy when she had time. Richard enjoyed seeing the pleasure on her face as she watched the birds flit from branch to branch. She'd hug the dog close to her with one hand while letting the other dangle in the water trickling along the small stream bed. A picture he'd now hold forever

in his heart.

Richard eyed his mother's favorite tree. Dragging the shovel loosely in his hand, he walked around the trunk and studied the ground. Finally, he decided on a spot that stayed shady most of the day, but had a good view of the house and stream. Gripping the spade, he dug into the rock embedded ground. It took him half a day to dig a hole deep enough, as he had to use the pick to remove many small stones and lift or roll the larger ones out of the way. Finally, he laid the shovel aside and wiped his hands down his jeans. He stood for a moment staring down into the hole then up at the small building he'd always called home. The thought of what he had to do made him shudder. His life would never be the same.

Taking a deep breath to build up his courage, he started toward the house. The one thing he hadn't prepared himself for when he stepped into the kitchen was the odor. He gagged and ran back outside, shutting the door behind him.

Rubbing his hands over his face, he sat down on a large boulder in the middle of the yard. Clutching his stomach, he wondered how he could stand that horrible smell. But he had to. Otherwise, it would only get worse. Pulling a bandana from his pocket and tying it around his nose and mouth, he prepared himself to face this horrible ordeal.

The swarming flies were thick and he waved his hands to shoo them away. Holding his breath, he quickly picked up Ruffy's body and carried it outside toward the stream. His arms trembled as he gently placed the dog in the hole. Covering the blood stained tangled fur with a layer of soil so the flies couldn't

reach the animal's flesh, he stepped away from the grave and inhaled deeply. Then he glanced toward the house with dread. The next job would be the hardest thing he'd ever attempted in his life.

Back in the kitchen, his insides rolled and jerked as he gathered strength to touch his mother's body. He needed to know how she died, so that when he found the scum who did this, he could give him the same treatment.

Filling a basin of water, he took a clean washcloth and a large towel from the small stash of linens. Nervously, he moved toward her and glanced at the lower half of her body. Her dress had been ripped up to the waist, revealing bloody thighs and her panties were wrapped around her ankles. She'd been brutally raped. His mouth went dry as he covered her nakedness with the towel, then he tenderly closed her eyes.

Tears flowed down his cheeks as he began washing the blood from her face. What would he do without her? He'd lost his dad only the year before and now her. The only human beings that ever understood his problem were now gone. They'd taught him how to read, write and do math and shown him a world of happiness. Even though they were poor, they never lacked for love and laughter. He clutched her small body to his chest. Rocking back and forth, he swore that whoever did this to her would pay the price at the hand of Richard Clifford.

After a tedious half hour of carefully cleaning her face, hair and the jagged cut across her throat, he felt he'd done the best he could. He went to her closet and took out her favorite dress, the one that made her blue eyes stand

out like jewels. He recalled how pretty she'd looked two years ago when they attended the town's fair. She'd whirled around the living room, making the skirt swirl out, showing her pretty lace slip. Dad had caught her in his arms, planted a big kiss on her lips, right there in front of him, and told her of her beauty and how much he loved her. Richard would never forget that moment, one of the happiest days of his life.

Struggling for several minutes, Richard finally got the blood soaked dress off her limp body and slid on the clean one. He held her in his arms for a few more moments, kissing her forehead, while his tears mingled with her beautiful long black hair. He lifted the small slender body onto her favorite quilt he'd taken off her bed. She'd like that. Her mother had sewn the wedding ring design for her and dad as a wedding present. Wrapping it neatly around her, he then slowly rolled her into a large plastic tablecloth, safety pinning the ends in hopes it would add some protection from insects.

Cradling her body in his arms, he staggered to the barn. He knew the police would have to take specimens to help find the murderer, so he couldn't bury her in the ground. He'd purposely didn't clean below her neck, afraid he might destroy evidence. But his heart pulsed with anger every time he thought about leaving such filth on her body.

Richard stood in front of the grain bin which they never used. This would have to do. He gently slid her body inside and secured the lid. At least no rats would get to her now. Composing himself, he went back to the hole where he'd placed Ruffy and finished filling the grave with dirt. He fashioned a cross of small stones on top and patted them into the soil. Shoulders drooping, he stumbled back toward the house and leaned the pick and shovel against the porch.

The realization hit Richard like a bolt of lightening. He would now be the

one responsible for what lived and died on this little plot of ground. At that moment, his emotions just seemed to click off.

He threw out some chicken feed and soon the hens were pecking at the ground close to his heels. Watching them scratch and eat, he thought how fortunate he'd been that no varmint had devoured them last night, because he'd forgotten to close up their coop.

Glancing up, he spotted Old Betsy the cow near the pasture gate, her neck stretched over the fence, looking straight at him with her mouth wide open, obviously bawling because she needed milking. Whitey the horse, stood next to her, moving his head up and down. Immediately, Richard went to the cow and led her into the barn. The odor of the decomposing body hadn't penetrated the enclosure so much that he couldn't go ahead and milk her inside. After relieving the cow's misery, he fed the horse and took special effort in finishing up the remaining chores.

When he stepped into the kitchen, he had to put his handkerchief back around his nose and mouth. His first job would be to get rid of that horrible pungent odor. He stoked the stove, then filled a large kettle with water and placed it on the top. While it heated, he searched the cabinets for the big bottle of ammonia he'd seen his mother use for cleaning. Soon, he found it and added a cupful of the strong cleaner to the hot water, then he set to scrubbing the kitchen floor. Working as though in a trance, he rubbed each spot, obsessed with the idea that getting rid of any trace of blood would erase the tragedy. But a deep bitterness gripped his heart and he vowed that he'd find the son-of-a-bitch who did this horrible deed.

After an hour, he leaned back on his haunches and studied the room, trying to picture in his mind what had happened. Had his mother fought the intruder? The blood splattered walls indicated to him that she had. Also, he'd noticed what looked like flesh and blood under her fingernails. If he was right,

she'd left her mark somewhere on the body of the murderer that he wouldn't soon forget. Even though Ruffy had always been a gentle animal, he believed the dog had tried to protect his mother, and that's what had gotten him killed.

Richard continued to scour the kitchen until he could see no more stains. He opened the windows and doors for air, then dumped the water far from the house and threw the cloth into the barrel where they burned the trash. Giving the wet kitchen floor time to dry, he ambled toward the front of the house and stood on the edge of what used to be their driveway. Odd, he thought, studying tire tracks that circled the area. Those definitely didn't come from a two wheeler. And as far as he recalled, no one had visited them for a week or more. So someone had been there while he was on his ride. Who, and what did they want?

He decided to take a deeper look in hopes of finding other clues. Searching around the edges of the bushes, he discovered an empty, but fairly new whiskey bottle. No one in his household drank, and people usually weren't so brazen as to toss an empty whiskey bottle into someone's front yard bushes. That is, unless it happened to be the murderer. He started to pick up the bottle, but yanked his hand back when he thought of the possibility of fingerprints. Having read about detectives and police enough to know something about their procedures, he ran into the house and hunted for a clean paper bag. Dashing back outside, he found a long thin stick, inserted it into the neck opening of the bottle, lifted it out of the hedge and dropped it into the container. Carefully carrying it back inside, he put a twister around the top of the sack and stashed it in one of the lower kitchen cabinets.

Returning to the front yard, he searched carefully in hopes of finding other clues. He checked every bush, corner and crevice, while wondering if his mother knew her killer.

Assuming the murderer was a man, Richard frowned and clinched his fist.

His father had explained rape to him a couple of years ago and he'd read about such cases in the police magazines. A lump formed in his throat, just thinking about what his mother must have endured. He let out a wail that made the birds fly from the trees in terror.

He picked up a stone and heaved it as far as he could...then another and another...he kept sailing them through the air until his arm ached. Finally, he stopped, dropped his hands on his thighs and sobbed.

Soon, he threw back his shoulders and decided right then and there, the time had come for him to stop crying and act like a man. He had things to do.