

the
LYNCHING
of
Louie Sam

a novel by

ELIZABETH STEWART



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

On the night of February 27, 1884, two white teenagers followed a lynch mob comprised of their fathers and almost a hundred other American settlers north from the Washington Territory into British Columbia, Canada. There they seized Louie Sam, a member of the Stó:lō First Nation, from lawful custody and hung him, claiming he was guilty of murdering one of their own. This novel is the fictionalized story of those two teenagers, George Gillies and Peter Harkness. Readers should be advised that the racism expressed by these and other characters, while offensive, is meant to reflect the attitudes of the period.

I have taken care in writing this historical fiction not to presume to express the thoughts or feelings of Louie Sam or the Stó:lō people, apart from what has been reported in the public record. The story of Louie Sam—who he was and what the injustice of his death meant and continues to mean to the Stó:lō Nation—remains to be told.

FOR LOUIE SAM

According to the Tuskegee Institute of Alabama, between 1882 and 1968 there were 4,742 lynchings in the United States. In Canada during the same period there was one—the lynching of Louie Sam.

“Groups tend to be more immoral than individuals.”

—Martin Luther King Junior

CHAPTER ONE



Washington Territory, 1884

MY NAME IS GEORGE GILLIES. My parents are Scottish by birth and I was born in England, but since we immigrated, we're all Americans now. We live near the town of Nooksack in the Washington Territory, just south of the International Border with British Columbia, Canada. Mam says the way we children speak, we sound just like we were born here.

In Scotland and England, my father, Peter Gillies, worked the farmlands of one rich laird after another. He likes to tell anyone who will listen that we came to America for freedom's sake—by which, he'll add with a wink, he means the land he purchased almost for free from lumbermen here in the Nooksack Valley. Father considered it a bargain because the land had already been cleared of the giant fir trees that grow in these parts to a hundred feet or more. Our house is a log cabin made from those firs, but we have plans to build a fine two-story plank house one day.

Father likes his joke, but he is serious about freedom, too. He tells us kids never to forget that the land we own is ours for all time and makes us free in ways we never could have been in Great Britain. Here, Father answers to no one but himself and God. And Mam says he only answers to God on Sundays.

A couple of years back, my brothers and I helped Father build a dam on Sumas Creek, which cuts through our land. We run a gristmill off the millpond that resulted from that dam. Homesteaders bring wagonloads of grain and corn from miles around to our mill to be ground into flour and meal. The driveshaft is trimmed from a Lodgepole pine and the waterwheel and pit wheel are made from fir. Father has plans to bring in a steel driveshaft from back east once the Canadians finish building their railroad through British Columbia. And once we've saved enough money from selling our miller's toll—the portion of flour that Father keeps as payment.

Between the mill and the farm, we work hard from dawn to dusk. Father says that's the price of freedom. Me, I count myself lucky that even if I wasn't born free, I am free now. Out here in the frontier a man can be whoever he sets his mind to be. My friend Pete Harkness was born in the States—Minnesota, to be exact—and he never lets me forget it.

"You'll never be president," Pete is fond of telling me.

He's referring to the fact that the United States Constitution requires that presidents be born on American soil—as though Pete, who had to repeat tenth grade, thinks that being born here makes him better fit for the job than I am. Pete and I are in the same grade now, but he's sixteen and reminds me every chance he gets that he's a year older than I am. Mam says not to mind him, that Pete hasn't had the advantage of being raised in a God-fearing family the way I have, at least not since his mother died three years ago and his father took up with Mrs. Bell. I have never heard Mam gossip about Mrs. Bell the way some people do, but I can tell from the way Mam's lips go tight at the mention of her name that she disapproves of her.

THIS SUNDAY PAST, you could say fate took me by the hand. I was walking my brothers and sister the four miles from our property to Sunday school at the Presbyterian church in Nooksack when halfway there we saw smoke rising above the trees. That in itself wasn't unusual—on a February morning, you'd be worried if you *didn't* see smoke rising from a chimney. But this was different: thick and black.

"That's coming from Mr. Bell's cabin," said John.

The Mr. Bell he was referring to was James Bell, an old-timer who ran a store out of his cabin, selling a few supplies to get by. He was also the lawful husband

of the very same Mrs. Bell who is currently living under the roof of my friend Pete's father.

We hurried around the bend in the trail ahead to see what was the cause of the smoke. Flames were leaping above the trees by the time we started down the narrow path through a thicket of dogwood that led from the trail to the cabin. When we got to the clearing, the wood shack was going up like tinder. Fire was licking out of the windows of the front room, where Mr. Bell kept his dry goods for sale. If I'd let him, John—who is thirteen and a know-it-all—would have rushed right up to it. Will, a year younger than John and pretty much John's shadow, would have been right behind him.

"Mr. Bell?" I called from a safe distance, holding John and Will back.

There was no answer, just the loud crack of blistering wood. I thought about running to the closest farmstead for help, the Breckenridges', but it would have been a good twenty minutes to get there, and another twenty back.

I tried again. "Mr. Bell!"

"He can't hear you!" said John.

I had to admit John was right. The bursting and crackling of the fire was making too much noise. There was nothing to do but inch up and have a look inside that inferno.

"You stay here with Annie," I told Will. Annie is

only nine, and I could see her eyes were wide with fright.

John and I crept alongside the cabin toward the back, where the flames hadn't caught hold yet, shielding ourselves from the heat. We peered through a window and saw Mr. Bell lying face down on the floor between the storeroom and the kitchen at the rear. A fog of smoke was quickly filling the space above him.

"We got to get him out!" declared John.

"Let's hope he's got a back door," I yelled over the din, because it was obvious we were not going through the front way.

We ran to the rear of the cabin and were relieved to see that there was a way into his kitchen. When we pushed open the door, smoke came rushing out at us. It stung our eyes and blinded us, but after a moment it cleared enough for us to see Mr. Bell lying there.

"Mr. Bell!" I called again, but he wasn't budging.

The fire was traveling fast from the front room. We had to get him out of there.

"Hold your breath!" I shouted to John.

The two of us dashed inside. I suppose it paid to be brothers that day, because without having to plan it, we each grabbed hold of one of Mr. Bell's arms and dragged him out of there, like his limbs were branches on a log we were lugging to reinforce our dam. He was heavy enough that even with two of us we made slow

progress toward the back door. A loud bang from the front room sent the taste of fear up from my stomach into my throat. I looked up to see burning timbers falling, and daylight where the roof used to be. I glanced at John. If he was as scared as I was, he didn't let it show. He just kept hauling Mr. Bell toward the door. I did what he did. Pretty soon we had Mr. Bell out on the grass and we were filling our lungs with good air.

John was a sight—his face streaked with grime, his Sunday clothes covered in ash and soot—and I reckon I was, too. My first thought was that Mam would have our hides for ruining our Sunday best. But that thought was chased from my head when I looked down at Mr. Bell. He still hadn't moved, and at a glance I saw the reason why—the back of his head was nothing but a bloody mess. John had gone pale. Annie and Will stood staring. Me, I felt my stomach rising. I'd chopped the head off many a chicken and watched the blood spurt, but this was different.

“What happened to him?” Annie asked, her voice high and frightened.

“Is he dead?” asked Will.

I knelt down and rolled him over. His eyes were wide open. His skin was gray against the white of his beard, and I could count what teeth he had left through his gaping mouth. The first thought that came into my head was,

“We got to fetch Doctor Thompson.”

“What the hell for?” John huffed. “Can't you see he's a goner?!”

“Don't be cursing in front of Annie,” I told him.

“He looks surprised,” she said.

“You'd be surprised, too, if your head got bashed in,” said John.

“How do you reckon it happened?” asked Will.

The three of them were looking down at Mr. Bell with unseemly curiosity, considering how recently his spirit had departed this world. I found a horse blanket on the woodpile and threw it over him.

“It's not for us to say,” I told them. “We need to fetch the sheriff.”

CHAPTER TWO



MR. BELL'S CABIN WAS A COUPLE OF MILES from Nooksack. John and I argued about which one of us should go for Sheriff Leckie to tell him about the violent end that had befallen Mr. Bell, and which one should stay with Annie, who had begun to blub and complain at the prospect of being left behind with a dead body.

"Stop crying," John told her. "Nobody even liked the old coot."

"Leave her be," I said.

Annie buried her head in my chest, adding tears and snot to the streaks of grime on my jacket—and settling which one of us would be dispatched for the sheriff to deliver the biggest news that had ever happened in the Nooksack Valley.

"All right, you go," I told John. "Take Will with you. And run."

"I know to run!" John snarled back, needing the last word just like always.

The four of us walked together down the path

to the trail. Annie and I watched our brothers take off at top speed toward town until they were out of sight. Now that she was a sufficient distance from the burning cabin—and from the body lying under the blanket—Annie calmed down.

"We should go home," she said. "We should tell Father what happened."

Mam is expecting a new baby any minute, and Father had stayed home from church to help mind Isabel, who's three. Father isn't big on churchgoing and preachers, anyway. He says he doesn't need a middleman between him and the Almighty. He's independent minded, and that's what attracted him to living in America in the first place. Mam's the one who makes us kids go to Sunday school. And she says that since we made the move to the Washington Territory, Father's taken up a little too much frontier spirit for his own good.

"We should wait here," I told Annie. "We found the body. We're witnesses. Sheriff Leckie's going to want to talk to us."

"John can tell him as good as you can."

So now my little sister was arguing with me, too. I was beginning to think I did not command adequate respect from my juniors.

"You stay here," I said, indicating a tree stump where she could sit down.

"Where are you going?"

“To investigate.”

“Investigate what?”

“To investigate what happened to poor Mr. Bell.”

“John says nobody liked him.”

“Just because a man isn’t liked doesn’t mean he deserved to die.”

People say Mr. Bell was strange in the head, starting with the fact that he chose for some reason to build his shack on the edge of a swamp instead of on decent farmland. Maybe that’s why Mrs. Bell took their son, Jimmy, and left him. That, and because she’s half the old man’s age.

“Why would he deserve to die?”

“I just said he didn’t!”

“You made it sound like somebody thought he did.”

“Just sit there!” I ordered, and walked away into the dogwood patch before she could squabble any further.

When I came out into the clearing, the heat from the cabin was enough to singe my hair. I gave the building a wide berth as I walked around it. The flames had pretty much eaten up the cabin inside and out and were making the leap to an open shed out back. I thought briefly about trying to save a wagon that was parked inside that shed, but the fire was moving too fast and with too much fury. As I watched the roof of the shed fall into the wagon’s bed, it dawned on me: Where was Mr. Bell’s horse?

“Get away from there!”

I spun around to see Mr. Osterman standing where the path opens from the dogwood into the clearing, motioning at me with his arm. Annie was standing beside him. Bill Osterman is the telegraph man for Nooksack. He is often to be seen riding the trail, checking the telegraph lines that follow it. He’s barely thirty, but he’s much respected hereabouts, for it’s the telegraph that keeps us settlers connected with the states back east, and California to the south. I’ve often thought that one day I would like to be a telegraph man, like him, living in a nice house in town and not having to wake up with the cows.

“Come away from there, boy!” he yelled. “You’ll be burnt as well as roasted!”

I obeyed him.

“We found Mr. Bell!” I told him, coming toward him. To my surprise, my voice cracked as I said it and my throat felt tight—as if any minute I might cry like a girl. I turned away from him while I got hold of myself, pointing to the blanket-covered body lying in the grass. “He’s there.”

Mr. Osterman went over and raised the blanket only long enough to take in the situation before dropping it and backing away. He’s a smart dresser compared to the farm men—maybe he didn’t want to get his nice clothes dirty.

“You found him like this?” he asked. His face

looked grim.

“He was inside the cabin. My brother John and I pulled him out.”

“And who might you be?”

“George Gillies, sir.”

He glanced over at Annie.

“You Peter Gillies’s kids?”

“Yes, sir. We were on our way to church. John and Will went ahead to fetch Sheriff Leckie.”

He nodded. Then, “Church will still be there next Sunday. You should take your sister on home now, son. This isn’t a sight for a little girl.”

Part of me knew he was right, but a bigger part of me wanted to stay put. I told him, “I have to wait for my brothers.”

“I’ll wait here for them to come back with the sheriff, and I’ll send them home after you.”

“I’d prefer to wait, if you don’t mind.”

I don’t know where I found the gumption. Mr. Osterman stared at me in surprise for a long moment. I thought he was angry, but then he let out a laugh.

“Well, Master Gillies, I can see you are a man who knows his own mind.” Then he became serious again. “Take your sister out by the trail, George. Give me a holler when you see the sheriff coming.”

I knew better than to argue with him any further. But I believed it was my duty to inform him, “His horse is gone.”

Mr. Osterman looked about Mr. Bell’s narrow strip of land, at the small paddock squeezed between the dogwood and the swamp.

“So it is. Likely stolen by whoever did this to him,” he said.

“You think somebody killed him?” He didn’t seem to hear me.

“Go on now,” he said. “Look after your sister.”

Annie and I waited by the trail like Mr. Osterman said. I kept my eyes fixed on the point where the trail disappeared into the woods ahead for the first sign of the sheriff. It was a mild day. The sun shone warm on my head. As the roar of the fire simmered down to the odd crackle, you could almost forget that something horrible had happened. But a picture of Mr. Bell’s smashed-in head flashed into my mind.

Whoever did this to him, Mr. Osterman had said.

Was he saying somebody had murdered Mr. Bell? If that was the case, the murderer could not be far away. It gave me the shivers just thinking about it, and made me keep a closer eye on Annie.

SHERIFF LECKIE ARRIVED ON horseback a half hour later, without John and Will. The boys were following on foot. He had with him Bill Moultray, who runs the general store and livery stable at The Crossing, a shallow point in the Nooksack River where the Harkness ferry carries folks across. In a way, Mr.

Bell was in competition with Mr. Moultray, selling provisions to the settlers, but Mr. Bell was like fly speck compared to Mr. Moultray, whose business is much bigger—supplying freight teams on the Whatcom Trail, the old gold rush route from the fifties that leads from the Washington Territory up to the Fraser River on the Canadian side of the International Border. Mr. Moultray is a big bug hereabouts, not just because he's rich, but also because he's been to Olympia many times, hobnobbing with the governor and the like.

When I saw the pair of them coming, I ran to fetch Mr. Osterman as he had bid me to do. I found him using a long stick to pick through the hot embers that were pretty near all that was left of Mr. Bell's cabin.

"It's the sheriff!" I called.

He swung around to me fast as could be with a startled look on his face.

"Didn't your pa ever teach you not to sneak up on a person?" he said.

By the time I got done apologizing and the two of us had walked back through the thicket to the trail, the sheriff and Mr. Moultray were pulling up their horses. Mr. Moultray is my father's age, not young and handsome like Mr. Osterman, but he dresses even finer—never to be seen without his gold watch hanging from his waistcoat. Beside Mr. Moultray and Mr. Osterman, Sheriff Leckie looked like a character

out of the Buffalo Bill's Wild West show in his dusty hat and long coat. He talks as slow as he moves, as though he's worn out from a life spent in the saddle, facing down outlaws and Indians.

"What have we got, Bill?" asked Sheriff Leckie, climbing down from his horse.

"Looks like somebody fired a shotgun into Jim Bell's head," replied Mr. Osterman.

Shot! Mr. Moultray looked as shocked as I was.

"Who would do such a thing to a harmless old man?" he asked, dismounting.

"I'll tell you what," said Mr. Osterman. "I got a bad feeling I may have put Jim Bell in harm's way."

The sheriff looked up from where he and Mr. Moultray were tying their horses off to nearby trees. His eyes went narrow.

"Why would you say that?" the sheriff asked.

Mr. Osterman glanced over at Annie and me with the same look my father gets when he wants to say something to Mam that isn't for our ears. Sheriff Leckie looked at us, too.

"You the other Gillies kids?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"You're the one who found the body?"

I'll admit I puffed up with pride to have the sheriff of Whatcom County ask me such a question.

"Yes, sir," I replied. "I am."

Sheriff Leckie turned to Mr. Osterman.

“Let’s see what we got.”

The remains of the cabin were smoldering now and the smoke stung my eyes as we stood in the clearing. Sheriff Leckie, Mr. Osterman, and Mr. Moultray rolled Mr. Bell’s body over to get a look at his bashed-in head. They knelt there for a long time in the grass, talking amongst themselves. They made Annie and me keep our distance, so it was hard to make out what they were saying, but I caught bits and pieces.

“... crazy old fool wouldn’t keep a gun to defend himself ...”

“... too trusting ... always taking in strays ...”

It was curious the way they blamed Mr. Bell for getting himself murdered. Still, I knew what they were saying. Many a time when we were passing by Mr. Bell’s cabin on the way to or from school, the old man would be waiting out on the trail to offer us children a sweet or a drink of water. But there were things about him—his yellow teeth and sour breath, the smell of his unwashed clothes, the way he laughed like he had some secret joke—that made me make excuses and get my brothers and sister away as fast as I could.

I listened some more.

“... got him in the back of the head ...”

“... must have turned his back to go for something ...”

“... or just caught unawares ...”

Then, from Mr. Osterman, “You think the Indian

could have done this?”

An Indian! The thought of an Indian murdering a white settler was enough to send a tremor through every one of us standing in that clearing. If the Indians thought they could get away with killing one of us, they were just as liable to get the notion of starting an all-out war, aimed at driving every man, woman and child out of our homes.

When we crossed the prairie by wagon train six years ago, the old-timers told us hair-raising tales about how the savages were known to attack the trains and wipe out whole families—innocent people who wanted nothing more than to create new homes for themselves out of the wilderness. Settlers have only been in these parts for barely longer than I’ve been alive, and the Indians outnumber us by a long shot. Before we arrived, all they did was fish and hunt. That left a lot of land unspoken for, and in the past twenty years lumbermen and miners and homesteaders have been pleased to claim that land as their own. Wouldn’t you know that the Indians would then turn around and complain that the territory belongs to them and we’ve got no business being here, even though they weren’t using the land for anything much to speak of.

It’s put into folks’ heads from the cradle that if a white man lets an Indian get the upper hand, the next thing you know your scalp is as likely as not to be

hanging off of his belt. We settlers are ever mindful of the fact that barely eight years ago Crazy Horse and his warriors massacred General Custer and his men at the Little Big Horn River, due east of us in Montana. The worry that even the friendly Indians might turn against us is enough to make every homesteader bolt the door at night and sleep with his rifle and an ax beside his bed, including my father. If an Indian killed Mr. Bell, none of us could sleep easy.

John and Will arrived back, winded from running the whole distance. "What's going on?" John asked, annoyed that he was missing out on something.

"They think an Indian might have done it," I told him.

"What Indian?"

"Just pay attention and maybe you'll find out."

He was irking me, making me miss out on important details. The blanket was back over Mr. Bell's body now, and the men were standing to continue their discussion, making it easier to hear them.

"I put out the word that I was looking for somebody to fix poles for me, and this morning Louie Sam shows up," Mr. Osterman was saying. "I could tell he was a bad type the minute I laid eyes on him, but I started walking the line with him down this way, pointing out what needed repairing. He was too slow-witted to catch on to what I was trying to get across to him. I'll tell you, he was hot-headed enough to

send smoke signals through his ears when I told him I couldn't use him and sent him away."

"And this was just this morning?"

"That's correct, Sheriff. He came by the telegraph office early for a Sunday, maybe nine o'clock."

The sheriff checked his pocket watch.

"It's now a quarter past eleven."

"The timing's right. I left him on the trail not far from here a little more than an hour ago. I kept on going down the line. I figured Louie Sam headed back into town. But maybe he didn't. Maybe he found Jim Bell's place."

"I know Louie Sam." It was Bill Moultray talking now. "He's a Sumas, from the Canadian side. And I know his old man, too. They call him Mesatche Jack Sam."

"Mean," said Sheriff Leckie, translating from Chinook, the trade jargon used by the various Indian bands in this area to make themselves understood to each other, and to us whites.

"You got it. Mean Jack's in jail up in New Westminster for murder."

This gave all three of them pause, until Mr. Osterman stated what we were all thinking: "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

If the father was a murdering Indian, so was the son likely to be. We had ourselves a suspect in the murder of Mr. James Bell, and his name was Louie Sam.