



**A
Place
To Die**

Rusty L Savage

A Place to Die

Fiction

by:

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Authors Note: I hope you enjoy reading “A Place to Die”. The characters and events in this story, though fictional, represent an era and a view of the journey that formed, shaped and painted a picture of Americana past and even now colors the present. And, though, there is a Hardin County and surrounding communities in western Kentucky, the truth is that none of it ever actually happened. But it could have...

Dedicated with Love to all my siblings, my parents, my wife, my children and to all my extended family. Special thanks to my Dad for his rich stories and Mom for her Love and Inspiration.

Chapter One

On New Year's Day, 1938, Johnny Ringo felt everything draining from his body. He closed his eyes and fell to his knees. Weakness flooded him, as he gasped for air. Nausea swept over him and came up in his throat. A dark hole rose up to swallow him and he just wanted to give in to it.

He opened his eyes. At first, he was frozen, his mind wavering until the incongruity of the facts filtered into his brain. It had come to this. After searching most of the night, he'd finally found Frank lying in the frozen water of Rough Creek, his body stiff and stone cold dead. Murdered. Shot in the back.

What a place to die. But whoever did this is a dead man walking he thought, looking down on the body of his dead brother. He reached over and put his hand on his brother's head. "I'll get 'em, Frank. I swear to you I'll get them. Whoever did this is going to pay dearly, Frank. I'm going to find him and take him off the face of the earth. That's a promise, Brother."

"DEAD MAN WALKING," he shouted those three words and then he said them over and over, until they burned into his brain like a searing brand. He stayed beside Frank for a very long time, his face drawn and pale. Then he stood, leaned over, picked up his brother and carried him home. Four days later they buried Franklin Everson Ringo. But they never forgot him.

On Monday, the tenth of January, Johnny caught the bus in front of his house and went back to school. He'd stayed out two days after they buried Frank, and had two homework assignments to make up in his junior class, one in history and one in math.

The last period of the day he sat in study hall and worked the entire period catching up both assignments. He finished the math as the bell rang for them to go home. Dad gummit, he said to himself, I'm going to finish this even if I have to walk home. He sat there

frantically working on the history assignment as fast and as hard as he could till he finally had it all down on paper.

He threw his books and papers together, ran to his homeroom and stuffed everything in his desk. He turned and left the room, running down the hall. Just as he came to the steps and made the turn to go down, he ran head on into Beth Ann Grayson. She stopped right in front of him, but he went around her and on to the bus. He sure as heck didn't want to talk to Beth Ann Grayson, or anybody else for that matter.

Beth Ann grabbed his arm and stopped him. "Johnny! Johnny," she said excitedly, "hold up a minute."

He stopped but didn't turn around. He hadn't been that close to Beth Ann since Saturday night, long ago now, it seemed. "What do you want, Beth Ann?" he asked, but still didn't turn around. "I have to catch the bus."

She pulled him around to face her. "The bus will wait. I want to talk to you for a second. What's wrong with that?"

"I'm in a hurry, Beth Ann. What do you want?"

"I just wanted to tell you that I'm terribly sorry about Frank. I know you were close. I know you miss him."

“You don’t know anything, Beth Ann Grayson. You don’t know anything at all, about how much I miss Frank. Nobody will ever know.” He moved away as the last word came out of his mouth. He didn’t look back.

He got to the bus before it pulled out and the door slammed in his face. “Hey! Hey!” he yelled, as he banged on the door.

The door opened and he stepped inside. Not more than a dozen kids, all little kids at that, lived down his way. He went to a seat in the back and sat down. He didn’t think; he just rode. Take me home. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

When the bus rolled to a stop at his driveway, he got off and headed up the hill toward the house. He went inside and straight up to his room. There he flopped down on the bed and let out a long sigh. “What are we going to do this afternoon, Frank?” *What am I going to do this afternoon and the rest of my life?*

Frank always made the plans. Frank decided where, when, how, and what. Frank told Johnny what to do. Frank! Frank! Frank! What in the world am I going to do?

Pull yourself together. *Pull yourself together, Johnny boy.*

Yes! Yes. That's the first thing. Pull myself together. Clear my head, Clear my mind. Think. Plan. Get something together. You can't do anything with your head and mind full of self-pity. Clear your head. Clear you mind. Clear. Think. Think, Johnny.

Think. Plan. Execute. Takes all three. You have to think to make a plan. You have to plan to execute. You have to execute to get it done. Everything works together. One's no good without the other. Bring it all together. Make it happen.

Lightning's out. No more running moonshine. That part is over. *Over.*

He sat on the edge of the bed, with his feet on the floor, and then quickly stood. You've got a start, Johnny. You've got a start. Keep it going... *keep it going, Johnny boy.*

He walked back and forth around the room for several minutes, from one end of the long room to the other. He let his mind wander, bringing in new thoughts, putting ideas together, exploring possibilities... brainstorming.

Suddenly, he stopped. "First things first," he said. "Find Frank's killers. Find them and take them off the face of the earth.

That's my number one priority. Period! Nothing comes before that. *Nothing!* They had to pay for what they did to Frank. They *will* pay!"

Okay! Okay. You got something there, Johnny.

It had to be the 'shiners. Nobody else, for sure. Frank didn't have an enemy in the world. Not even among the moonshine people. Frank knew all of them. Every single one. They knew Frank, or at least they thought they did. Yea, they thought they knew who he was. He made the rounds. He talked to them. He knew their operations. When. Where. How. Frank knew all of it. But they didn't know he knew, didn't know what all he knew, didn't know why he knew. But somebody must have found out.

Go talk to the shiners, Johnny. Find out who knows what and when and how. That's the place to start. Find the ones who did it and kill 'em. It's simple. If you can't find the ones who did it, take 'em all out. Take every last one out. But first, find out who actually did the killing.

He turned, went down the steps and into the kitchen. Just as he rounded the end of the table, looking through the window, he saw a car headed up their driveway. Who's that? It's nowhere close to time

for Mother and Dad. They wouldn't be in for another two, three hours. They rode the work bus anyway. Couldn't be them.

He ran to the window in the front room, pulled the curtain back, and looked out. A county sheriff's car. A stupid deputy snooping around again. They put up a good show, but they didn't have a clue. Besides, the sheriff had been through everything a dozen times and more, and they still haven't come up with anything. They could spend the next ten years investigating and likely wouldn't know any more than they know right now. Go away. Don't even bother. I'll take care of Frank's killers. Go home, deputy.

He went back into the kitchen, slid a chair away from the table, and sat down. He propped his elbows on the table and lowered his head to his hands. That's the way he sat when he heard the knock on the front door.

He got up slowly and went to the door. "Yeah," he said, staring up at a man in a deputy sheriff's uniform. The guy must have been seven feet tall. He would have to duck his head to come through the door. He had dark-brown, curly hair, cut short, and a clean-shaven, chubby face. He looked young, in his early to mid twenties. He wore glasses and didn't look too bright.

“This the Ringo place?” the deputy asked.

“Yeah,” he said. *You don’t even know where you are, deputy. How do you expect to find a killer in a part of the county that wouldn’t give a lawman the time of day, let alone answer a bunch of stupid questions?* “What can I do for you?”, he wound up saying.

“Is Mr. Tom Ringo at home?”

“Nope.”

“You must be the young one. John, is it?”

“Yeah, I’m Johnny.”

“Sorry about your brother. I’m told he was a fine young man.”

“Yeah. He *was* a fine young man. Now he’s dead. Killed by a bunch of murdering skunks. Shot in the back.”

“I’ve been assigned to investigate his murder, Johnny. My name is Jerry Wells. I’m a deputy sheriff here in Hardin County. Perhaps you could help me.”

“I don’t think so. I don’t know anything.”

“Who are the murdering skunks you mentioned?”

Johnny stood and looked at the deputy but didn’t say anything for awhile. Then lowering his eyes to look at his feet, he said, “I wish I knew, deputy. I wish to God I knew.”

“What would you be doing about it if you knew?”

“I think the answer to that should be obvious,” he said, raising his eyes to look at the deputy’s face. “Yeah, pretty obvious.”

“An eye for an eye. Is that the way you look at it?”

“That’s the way I look at it.”

“You don’t think we ought to be investigating your brother’s murder then. Is that what you’re saying?”

“I’m not saying either way. That’s between you and the sheriff.”

“You have any ideas about who shot Frank?”

“The shiners, who else?”

“Who are the shiners, Johnny?”

“Moonshiners. Hell, they’re all over this county.”

“What did your brother have to do with the moonshine people?”

“He knew them, deputy. He knew all of them. Look, I have chores to do.”

“We’re working on finding your brother’s killer. Your help could be crucial to that. Work with us, not against us.”

“Look, we’ve told you guys everything we know. Now, it’s up to you. Frank’s killers are out *there* someplace,” he said, swinging his arm around in a half circle. “I can’t help you.”

“Well,” he drawled, “I’ll be back. We’ll find whoever is responsible for your brother’s death.”

“Yeah, sure,” Johnny said, closing the door as the deputy walked away.

You couldn’t find your nose right in front of your face, deputy, and probably could care less anyway.

It was the same all over, after all. What did it matter if the moonshiners killed each other off? Or if the thieves stole from each other? Or if they cut and mutilated each other and some bled to death? They were doing the county a favor. Saving taxpayer money.

But it did matter to some folks, like the fathers and mothers, and the wives and the children, and the brothers. Yes, it mattered very much to Johnny Ringo when Franklin Everson Ringo, eighteen years old and at the top of his senior class, was shot in the back. So much that he slowed in all things until he almost stopped completely. He was numbed. The ground he walked on tilted and threatened to send him reeling as it rose up to trip him as he ascended them. His legs

seemed different lengths and his hands grew heavy and sluggish. Someone had killed his brother, and no one cared or wanted or could, even, do anything about it. No one but Johnny Ringo.

He watched through the window until the deputy drove away. Then he walked back toward the kitchen. *Just stay the heck out of it. Leave it alone. Blow it off, deputy. Blow... it... off.*

Suddenly, he stopped dead in his tracks. Blow it off, he thought. That's it. Heck fire, that's it. Blow it off. Dynamite! By God, he'd blow every moonshine still in this county off the map if he had to. He'd get Frank's killers with dynamite and blow the stills away too.

At the thought, he chuckled out loud. Now you're thinking, Johnny. *Now you are thinking, Johnny boy. Blow them to kingdom come.*

Johnny just stood there shaking his head. Then he brought his head up slowly and looked all around. Where are you Frank? *Where are you?* It's you. *It is you.* You're telling me what to do, aren't you? I know you're here, Frank. Don't leave me. "We'll get 'em. Together we'll get 'em. We're a team. Always have been. Always will be.

Yeah, Frank, we'll get 'em, every last one," he said out loud to himself and to Frank.

He knew what he had to do. He grabbed his tablet and began laying out a plan. He'd hit every moonshine still in this part of the county. When he wasn't in school or doing chores, he'd roam the hills, starting at the top and working his way down. Ben Glasser held the top link in the chain of the moonshine world in that part of Hardin County. The reality was that the field of potential suspects, in Johnny's mind, included most of the moonshiners in that section of the county.

So he began making the rounds. He went from one still to another. He made them all. Talked to everybody. He went to stills he'd only been to in the dark of night, when he and Frank had paid them midnight visits. He found out who had set them up and who owned them. He learned the location, the layout, the output from each and who bought it. He learned the lay of the land in all directions within a ten-mile radius. But he didn't know who shot Frank and he didn't know why.

Several times he saw Jerry Wells, the deputy, going through the country, but he always avoided him, stayed out of his sight, didn't

want any contact with the law. The law, in a situation like this, was about as useless as tits on a boar hog. The man was wasting his time, wasting county time.

People who lived around there didn't want anything to do with the law. Even if they knew something, they wouldn't tell it to the law. But they might tell him. Might let something slip, might say the wrong thing, give him a scrap of information, something, anything he could sink his teeth into, or put him on the track of the killer.

It took a few weeks for Johnny to get a map of Hardin County and put everything he knew on the map. He marked locations, made notes about each place, laid it all out on the map so he didn't have to rely on memory. There were twelve stills within a ten-mile radius. Four were the washtub kind, made a few gallons a day, and sold a little now and again to the local drunks. Two made enough to supply their own needs, sold a few gallons and gave a few jugs away to friends and relatives, but kept several gallons stored away. Six were pretty good-sized operations and cranked out anywhere from six to twenty gallons a day. Four of those six sold in Hardin County mostly, but they sent some up north to Louisville, Cincinnati, and a few other places.

Two belonged to Ben Glasser. He had the biggest operation, cooked off twenty to forty gallons a day and sent some as far north as Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland, and a few places in between. Two men drove up from New Orleans to Ben's place every two weeks, always on a Wednesday, and hauled a barrel back with them each time. Johnny had been at Ben's place twice when the two men showed up.

Ben's moonshine runs were the best. Everybody said Ben ran the best in that part of the country. He let his mash set a full four to six days and didn't put a lot of junk in it, like buckeye seeds or carbide or lye, to hurry the fermentation. Ben was one of the few who took his time.

He cooked each batch slowly over a low fire in a fifty-gallon capacity cooker with a pure copper gooseneck coming out of the cap to carry the steam over to the flake stand. The open barrel was filled with cold limestone spring water, so clear you could see the worm of copper fitted to the gooseneck and coiled down through the barrel to be cooled then condensed into clear moonshine whiskey that dropped from the spigot into gallon jugs and sold for five to eight dollars a gallon.

Half of each run was what Ben called his special stuff. The very finest was run again, doubled through the works, and filtered through charcoal before it was put up to age and mellow in thirty-gallon, white oak barrels. He moved the barrels back inside a dark room in the cave down on the bank of Rough Creek and aged it, a minimum of, two to three months, Ben had said, to give it color. If they were not willing to wait for the fine stuff, Ben had said, they could go someplace else or take the clear stuff as it came out of the spigot.

After Ben's finest brew aged to his satisfaction, the speaks and high rollers up in Chicago, Cleveland and Detroit sent for it at one hundred and eighty dollars a barrel or six dollars a gallon. Johnny had discovered that Ben had several thousand gallons stored and aging in four caves along the bank of Rough Creek. It didn't take long to locate each cave and mark them on his map.

Johnny's map was laid out in a circle with four quadrants that covered a ten-mile radius. In the center of the circle was his house. He discovered that all the stills were in the western half of the circle, four in the northwest quadrant, eight in the southwest quadrant. The

eastern half of the circle had no stills at all. It surprised him. He'd never looked at it or thought about it from a birds eye view.

He learned a lot by looking at the map. Almost all of the moonshine was produced within a hundred and twenty degree arc on the circle. One-quarter of them within thirty-degrees on the arc and three-quarters in the other ninety-degrees. That was understandable when he considered how Rough Creek and its tributaries ran through the area.

Except for the head of Rough Creek, which was about a mile and a half into the northeast quadrant of his circle, the entire creek meandered through the western half of the circle, crossed his circle at about the two-hundred and twenty-five degree mark, then ran on for another five or six miles, before it spilled over into Grayson County, down close to the Breckinridge County line.

He knew more stills were located along both sides of the creek, and along spring branches and smaller creeks that fed it all the way through that part of the county and into Grayson County, but that was a little too far away for his purposes. He concentrated on the stills producing moonshine in and around his community. They were the

ones that contributed to the lawlessness that affected him and his neighbors, and they were the ones he planned to get rid of.

Chapter Two

Days came and went while he added information to the map and studied every detail. At the point where Rough Creek crossed his circle, five miles as the crow flies but nine and a half miles across the hollows, he extended the area to take in the communities of Pierce Mill, Solway, and Meeting Creek, and then he added Constantine, which was about two miles into Breckinridge County.

He even went beyond his circle in Hardin County to include Hardin Springs, which was about eleven miles by road from his house and went through the communities of Fairfield, Pleasant Grove and Limp, all situated along or close to the banks of Rough Creek and its tributaries. His reasoning behind extending his range and including

the other communities was because of the relationship of certain individuals to persons within his own community.

Almost everyone within those communities was related to, or friends with, people within his community. He knew a lot of visiting and carousing took place among and between those people, especially the rowdy bunches, therefore needed to be included. As time went on, he located and marked four other stills that were outside his range that he still considered relevant to his purposes.

On a Friday afternoon in mid February, Johnny stepped off the school bus and slowly made his way up the hill to his house. Here it is February, he said to himself, and I don't know anymore than I did the day Frank was killed. I mean about who shot him and why. I've got to start making progress in that direction. Got to find some answers about Frank's murder. If I don't get some answers soon, I'll start blowing away every dang moonshine still around here. Ben Glasser's will be the first to go.

He came to the back door, went in through the kitchen and straight up to his room. He flopped down on the bed, shoved the pillow under his head and let his eyelids drop. The wind whistling around the corners of the old house made a low moaning sound, and

soft whispers from outside wafted in. It seemed to bring the beauty of life to mind. It also brought sensations of things experienced and things remembered.

Johnny thought back to the time when Frank began to take an interest in him and began to show and tell him the things he'd learned about the hills. They began to get closer and doing things together. Frank took him on a tour through the hills and showed him all the caves, spring branches, all the good and bad spots, what to avoid and what not to avoid. Johnny learned a lot about the hills and the people who lived in them since that tour with Frank, but he still had a lot to learn before he knew them like Frank.

Frank not only knew the hills and the people who lived there, he knew the moonshine world and the men who ruled over it. That's how it had become so easy for them to break into that world and do the things that brought them more money than they had ever dreamed possible.

Frank talked about getting an education when he graduated, making something of himself, and he wanted Johnny to think about it too. Frank was as smart as a whip. He made straight "A"s in school since first grade, helped Johnny with homework, and pushed him to

learn all he could. Johnny had to admit his interest in school had improved and his grades went up a short time later.

But there was always the question of money and the high cost of college confronting them. It was something they couldn't overlook. Still, it became a regular subject at the supper table for the Ringos.

"We can't let the lack of money stop us, Johnny," Frank had said after a half dozen times the subject had been kicked around after the evening meal.

"I know, Son," Dad had said in his strong voice. "You boys know your mother and I go to work everyday, but times are hard and money is short. I don't know how we can get you through college. It's barely enough to keep us in the things we need."

Mother agreed and said, "We want you boys to get that education and make a good life for yourselves. Most boys are workin' and helping to pay their families way. We're gonna keep that from happening to you boys. I want you both to go to college but you'll have to put your minds to it and work for it."

"Johnny and I understand. It's something we'll have to work out, Dad," Frank had said on the heels of Mother and Dad's statements. "Leave it to us. I don't want you and Mama to worry

about it. If we're not smart enough to pay for college, then we don't deserve it."

With that, Frank rose up from the table and motioned for Johnny to follow him outside.

That night sitting on the porch swing, Johnny had learned about the plan Frank had come up with and had been working on for some time. Frank had explained his plan in great detail, and Johnny offered his comment, "It sounds risky, but I guess we could try it."

"We can do it with very little risk," Frank had said. "If we're careful and don't get greedy we can easily pay for college and nobody gets hurt. The moonshiners might lose a little sleep if they happen to find out what's going on, but more than likely they'll never find out and even if they do, they won't be able to do anything about it, not legally anyway."

At first, Johnny debated with himself about the right and the wrong of it. He struggled with his conscience until he had convinced himself that it was okay. What did it hurt if they filched a little moonshine off the lawbreaking moonshiners? They were not hurting good and decent people.

They had begun acting on Frank's plan right away and the results were phenomenal. Money poured in, and the dumb moonshiners were too busy moving and hiding their stills from the Feds and the local law they didn't even know what was happening.

Frank came up with a brilliant plan and the only people they had to worry about were the law-breaking moonshiners. They had little or nothing to fear from the law. "What a scheme," Johnny said under his breath.

The boys knew where the stills were and they knew the hills, better than the back of their hands. They were trusted and undistinguishable as a threat to the Shiners. They would shinny in and fetch a little from every single still in the area and it would never be missed. Frank knew the schedules and deliveries and they ran their late night raids like clockwork, just like he planned it.