

CHAPTER ONE

The calluses on the palms of Rusty's hands were split, the loose skin sodden, the pink underneath covered by a creamy white cap. It was warm to the touch, the raised mound ready to erupt. The excess skin bubbled like it'd been burned, but it hadn't — only by the summer. The bandages covering the old calluses were soaked with blood that was so dark it could've been black, the scabs underneath trying to form as the darkness crusted to the skin. The edge of the adhesive curled, the fabric crisped by the afternoon. It was August.

The hoe's wooden shaft was splintered and kept together with silver duct tape, but it hardly worked. On more than one occasion, a loose sliver of wood would free itself from the bundle and stick Rusty like a dull knife. If he was lucky, it would miss his calluses. If he wasn't, it wouldn't. His hands ached constantly.

The garden hoe Rusty used was the same one he'd been using since he was seven-years-old. That was two years ago. Every summer, Rusty and his brother, Bo, would spend their afternoons in their father's field, touching up the soil and replacing the old fertilizer with a new, fresh batch. They would build small mounds around each of the tobacco plants in the rows and fertilize them with the homemade concoction their father made up in his shed. Whatever it was, it kept the pests away and the leaves grew faster and

thicker every year. It sizzled when the sun hit it just right, and it smelled something awful.

Rusty's hands weren't as strong as Bo's were. Bo was four years older than his brother and had been working in the field for nearly three times as long. The skin on his palms had permanent scars from where the calluses once were, and the dark stains under his fingernails were permanent. Rusty was still getting used to it. He'd learned to let his nails grow past the edge of his fingertips to avoid getting anything stuck underneath. He couldn't get his cuticles clean, no matter how much he scrubbed them. The infection he got under his thumbnail during the first summer in the field nearly caused his thumb to be amputated — that was the low point. The homemade fertilizer wasn't meant to touch the skin, he learned.

The sweat on the back of Rusty's neck helped him stay cool, but the sensation would be only temporary. The pint of muddy water he was permitted to bring with him was supposed to last from lunchtime until supper, but it never did. Bo learned to ration his portion to conserve it for when he needed it most, which was something Rusty tried to do too. But his willpower was still a work in progress. Temptation was hard to ignore sometimes.

Rusty looked up into the sun and shielded his eyes with one hand, squeezing onto the splintered handle with the other. The blue horizon was cloudless above him. There wasn't a lick of wind. Time stood still, as if the earth had stopped rotating on its axis. Rusty wondered where the edge of the world was as he drove his hand further into the splinter, ignoring the tugging against his skin that followed. He swatted

away a pesky horse fly. It'd been circling him as if it were sizing him up for hours, tantalizing him with its bulging eyes that shone like emeralds. Rusty thought he heard the fly laughing at him as it made a figure-eight in the sky with its tiny wings.

A warm liquid ran down Rusty's wrist and tickled his skin. At first, he thought the fly had finally made its move and was prepared to attack, but the trickling down his forearm made him think otherwise. His hand felt wet, cooler than the rest of him, even the back of his neck. He looked down, ignoring the faded bandages and damaged skin that covered his hand, and saw a trail on his wrist where the liquid washed away the soil. It looked like a water droplet swimming down a window the way it did after a shower when the overhead fan stopped working, and Rusty wondered if rain was coming. He looked up again but was still unable to find a single raincloud. August sizzled against his skin. He put his hand to his forehead and wiped his brow with the inside of his thumb, and more liquid oozed down his wrist. It was pus.

Then he felt the pain.

It was a burning sensation, like his hand caught on fire or was thrown into an incinerator and held there. His hand shook as he looked at it, his eyes unable to stop his muscles from spasming. Using the nails on his thumb and forefinger on his other hand, he grabbed the edge of the curled bandage like it was a delicacy. The pain was severe, numbing, and he wanted to see how bad it looked. The blister in the center of his palm hurt the worst.

"Don't touch it," Bo said. He stood next to Rusty and hovered like a hawk. Rusty didn't notice the shadow.

“It hurts,” Rusty said, clenching his eyes shut and flexing his jaw. “It hurts really bad.”

“No shit it hurts. But it won’t get any better if you keep tearing that off. Do you want it to get infected?”

Rusty shook his head. He remembered what it was like when his thumb got bad.

“Then stop touching it.”

Rusty opened his eyes and nodded, even though it still hurt.

“Hurry up and get back to work before dad sees,” Bo said, then turned and went back over to his row of plants. The mounds of soil surrounding the base of the tobacco plants he worked on were much cleaner than the ones Rusty made. That wasn’t unusual.

Rusty held the side of his hand against his chest and pressed. He clenched his eyes shut again and slid the inside of his cheek between his teeth, biting down as hard as he could without drawing blood. More warm pus slid out from underneath the wet bandage and dripped onto his skin. It was as thick and hot as melting wax, and it left a layer of grime where it traveled. The first droplet from before rolled all the way to his navel now, but he fought the urge to scratch it.

Before getting back to work, Rusty turned and looked over his shoulder. Their father’s shed was less than a hundred yards from where he stood, and Rusty knew there was a jug of water inside — the clean kind. Their father took trips into town to buy a few gallons of imported spring water each week, but he always kept it for himself. Rusty, Bo, and their little sister, Ruby, were left drinking the well water. All the extra

iron made it look and taste like metal. It was as clean as mud.

Before Rusty could consider making a run for the shed, the screen porch on the trailer slammed, sending a flock of farrows scrambling. His head jolted back around and he stood at attention, his muscles tensing as he waited for his father's wrath. If he made him mad, Rusty knew he might take away the rest of his water for the day — it wouldn't be the first time.

Lenny Travis, his father, stepped out onto the porch with a Budweiser in hand, sporting his usual white tank top with yellow-stained armpits. Lenny was the meanest bastard east of the Mississippi, and all the townfolks agreed. Rusty couldn't say for sure if that was true, but he'd heard someone say it once. It resonated with him. While everyone else in Plum Springs, Kentucky — population: 473 — was kind and friendly and would give you the shirts off their backs in a second, Lenny would take it from you. Then he'd spit on it and throw it in the river, just because he could. That's just the type of man he was. Rusty was scared of him.

Lenny burped once into the air and smiled at the echo that boomeranged around him. Even from a distance — it was maybe fifty yards from where Rusty stood to the front porch where his father was — Rusty thought he could smell the beer on his father's breath. It was early afternoon on a Tuesday, and Lenny was already piss drunk. Rusty got that uneasy feeling in his belly, the same one he felt every time his father called his name, and he did all he could just to stay standing upright. He clutched onto the rounded part of the wooden handle in his hands for extra support.

“Rusty!” Lenny yelled. “What the hell you lookin’ at, boy?”

Rusty stiffened and shook his head.

“Speak up, boy.”

“Nothing, I was just —”

“You was just nothing. Don’t you lie to me.”

Rusty looked toward Bo in search of his support, but his head was facing downward and his arms were hard at work with his own hoe. As strong a Bo was, he tried to stay out of it, and Rusty understood why. Lenny was mean and vicious and tougher than them both combined, and Rusty knew he was on his own. The scratchiness of the sandpaper that formed in his throat made him choke as he tried to swallow. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth as if it were attached there. Rusty’s words eluded him.

When he looked back toward the porch, his father was already halfway toward him. A scowl blanketed his face with rage, sending anxious jolts rushing through Rusty’s body like crashing waves against the shore. Rusty tensed, his boots like cinder blocks against the dirt. The beer can in Lenny’s hand was dented in the middle and missing the tab from the top, like they all were. Rusty squeezed the handle of the hoe even harder, but the pain in his hand returned and he dropped it, leaving himself defenseless. Both he and his father watched the silver of the duct tape disappear under a cloud of dust.

Lenny grinned.

Rusty cradled his injured hand in his free one and kept it close to his chest, as if he were a crow cradling a wounded wing. It was pulsating, his skin on fire. His chest was puffed out only to give his heart enough

room to beat as hard as it needed to — he knew he was no match for his father.

Lenny pulled up when he was only a few feet away and stared at Rusty as if he were deep in thought. Rusty squirmed at the thought of what was on his father's mind. He avoided Lenny's eyes and found himself staring at the day-old stubble that covered his father's face and neck. For the first time, Rusty noticed a touch of gray starting to penetrate the black, and he thought it made him look angrier. To Rusty, his father looked older than he actually was, and he wondered if that meant he would die young. Part of him wished that to be true. A big part of him.

"What's the matter with you, boy?" Lenny said. His voice slurred already.

Lenny's hot breath almost made Rusty gag. It smelled of rotten cheese and stale beer, and it took all the restraint Rusty had not to turn away. He knew he'd get backhanded if he did.

"My hand hurts."

"Snake getcha?"

Rusty shook his head.

"Coon trap? Bullet hole? Pipe bomb?"

Rusty said nothing. The pain in his hand was starting to numb.

Lenny motioned to the sad mound of fertilizer that rose up the base of one of the tobacco plants. "Get some of that stuff on ya?"

Still nothing.

"Then what, boy?" A snort crawled out from somewhere in the back of Lenny's throat as he inhaled sharply through his nose. He sniffed once.

Rusty pulled his hand away from his chest and opened his fingers to show his father. For the first time all day, a small gust of wind came along and blew directly into the callus. It provided Rusty with a moment of chilled relief, but the pain came back with a vengeance, even worse than it had been before, once it disappeared.

“You got a little blister? That’s what you’re cryin’ about out here?”

“I ain’t crying.”

The beer can made a noise that reminded Rusty of tin being crushed. It was like that time his father had an old clunker Ford smashed up and set on fire instead of having it towed to the scrap yard. The metal twisted and popped then, just like the beer can.

Lenny scowled again. “Don’t you talk back to me, boy.”

Rusty lowered his hand and stood as straight as he could. His shoulders rose and his lower back arched, and he flexed his pectorals, even though they were flatter than his sister’s chest. One day, Rusty thought, he’d be strong enough to take on his old man. But until then, he wasn’t sure what to do. Backing down only seemed to make it worse.

Lenny leaned forward and grabbed Rusty by the wrist, his man fingers like tentacles around Rusty’s boyish skin. Rusty tried to yank his arm away, but the clasp around his wrist tightened. Unblinking, and with the muscles in his jaw flexing, his pupils widening, Lenny twisted until Rusty couldn’t bear the pain anymore. Rusty finally gave in, nervous sweat pouring down his face, and let his father flip his hand over. His fingers were only loosely opened, but Lenny squeezed

even harder on the pressure point until they spread out completely. Rusty refused to let his eyes close, refused to let his father know he was in pain.

Without hesitation, Lenny took his open beer and poured it over Rusty's callused hand. The sting that swept through Rusty's hand and wrist was worse than anything he'd ever felt before — worse than when the infected thumbnail separated from his skin; worse than when his pinky got stuck in the pencil sharpener at school; worse than when he stepped on a piece of scrap metal in the driveway and split open the bottom of his foot. The pain was worse than all of that. His hand trembled as the cold liquid swallowed the bandage whole. A tiny air bubble pushed out the beer in gushes, the pressure of the thrusts like a vacuum against his wound. Rusty cried out in silent agony as his lungs begged him for relief.

Lenny's grip tightened.

The tin can crunched between Lenny's stout fingers as he squeezed, and Rusty could do nothing but bite on his tongue and wait for the pain to pass. Rusty wanted to scream and fight against his father's overpowering strength, but knew he shouldn't; screaming would only make Lenny want to inflict more pain. It had so many times before, as if being in control of it put him in a state of ecstasy. The need for that high had gradually gotten worse since Rusty's mom left for the last time, and that was when Ruby was just a baby. Bo took the brunt of the outbursts up until recently. Rusty couldn't remember being hurt by their father before he started working in the field.

Rusty turned his head and closed his eyes and wished the can would be empty soon. He would have

prayed to the sky God for the pain to stop, but he questioned if it was real. Bo told him it was, but Rusty wasn't so sure; he couldn't understand why God would let his father hurt them the way he did. Bo suffered through the pain for much longer than Rusty, which confused Rusty even more. Bo accepted the sky God as being real, even with all the bad things that happened to them. Rusty, on the other hand, wasn't as quick to accept something that wasn't there to help him when he was too weak to help himself. He thought the sky God was supposed to be there to protect him.

The flow of liquid eventually slowed and the grip around Rusty's wrist loosened, but the pain didn't subside right away. Rusty grabbed onto his wrist with his free hand and fell to the dirt, writhing in pain, still refusing to let his father know how much it hurt. He felt moisture on his face and realized he was crying, but he could do nothing to stop it.

He buried his face into the pit of his elbow and hid behind his t-shirt. He wished he could disappear. He'd been searching for his own wardrobe for years, for his own Narnia, but he was still looking. The tobacco field didn't offer him up much in terms of material to daydream about. He always wondered if the shed might lead to that place for him, but the shed was forbidden.

The empty beer can landed next to Rusty's head, the crushed center creating a pointed edge that could have sliced his face. Rusty rolled onto his stomach and let the sharpness of the soil scratch his exposed skin. The patch underneath him was as dry as chalk, and it smelled like dust.

“Told you you was crying.” Lenny spat at the ground, causing a puff of dust when it hit, and laughed. “Wussy boy.”

When he thought his father was gone, Rusty used his shirt to wipe the water from his cheeks. As he did, something warm and wet poured over his boots and socks, making his already sweaty feet like a swamp. Before he figured out what it was, Rusty curled his toes to try to stop whatever it was from seeping in between them. There was already something starting to grow in the pit between his pinky and ring toes, and he knew something wet would only worsen it. When he took his socks off at night, the stink made him sick to his stomach.

Rusty stayed on the ground, belly down, until he heard the door to the screen porch bounce against the door frame — he knew for sure his father was gone when he heard it. Then he heard a muffled voice coming from inside the trailer, his father’s, yelling out for Ruby. His sister was only six-years-old, but Rusty feared her time was coming before long. He hoped she’d be working out in the field too, where he and Bo could keep an eye on her. Being inside that trailer wasn’t safe, especially for girls — just ask his mom. If their father ever put his hands on Ruby, Rusty’s not sure what he’d do to him; he’d never gone as far as imagining it would ever happen, although maybe it was because he was trying to pretend it wouldn’t. But he knew, deep down, it eventually would.

Just thinking about it made his skin hot.

CHAPTER TWO

While still face down in the dirt, a haze of dust clouding his vision, Rusty felt Bo's presence hovering over him again. A shadow appeared in the periphery and blocked out what Rusty could still see, sending the orange sun into hiding behind the lurking darkness. Bo wasn't big, but his shadow seemed it; he looked like a giant with oversized, thinned legs, and a long and narrow torso that was stretched beyond what was normal. Even his head was a miniature version of what it should've been, outlined with a smoky gray hue. Rusty's entire body was covered by the giant shadow, and he was amazed at its size. It almost made him forget about the pain in his hand.

Using his good hand, Rusty rolled himself onto his back, coughing away the cloud of dust, until he looked up at his older brother. Bo's face was smeared with soil and his hair was just as greasy as it usually was, and he looked like a working man. Rusty saw the outline of what looked like a mustache starting to grow above his upper lip. When Bo extended out his arm to help Rusty to his feet, the clump of slicked underarm hairs stuck out too. Bo, unquestionably, was becoming a man; his changing body was proof of that. Rusty wondered how long it would be before Bo would be strong enough to stick up to their father.

Rusty took Bo's moistened hand, felt the coarse, chapped skin on his own, and was pulled to his feet. Rusty wanted to thank his brother for looking out for

him, but when he looked at him and saw the sorrow in his eyes, he decided against it. Bo seemed to notice too, because he looked away, as if to hide his face, and his tears.

But no tears came.

Even so, the gesture told Rusty more than any tears could have. Bo, while definitely growing into a man, wasn't one quite yet. His body may have been well on the way, but there was still something missing — it was the emotional strength that men possessed that boys did not. Bo hadn't found that yet. Even though Rusty was four years younger than his brother and not even in double digits yet, he could recognize that. The sadness in his older brother's eyes told Rusty they both still had a long way to go before they'd become men, before they could stand up to their father. They would be spending many more years in this field.

The tobacco field was their father's business. He kept some plants for himself and smoked the finished product like he was a chimney, but on his weekly visits into town — the same ones where he'd pick up fresh water for himself — he'd drop off a truckload of plants to be manufactured and sold. Rusty didn't know much about the process, and he didn't care to know, either. All he knew for sure was he and Bo were the ones to do all the work in the field — planting and preserving and harvesting the tobacco plants — while their father sat inside smoking, drinking Budweiser, and staying out of the sun. It didn't seem fair.

Bo tore off a portion of the bottom of his t-shirt, which once was a bright white but was now stained brown, until he had a piece as long as his arm. He tore through the cotton with his hands, and the harder he

pulled the further the t-shirt rode up on him. By the time the piece of filthy cotton was torn, Bo's navel was showing. Rusty saw a small trail of hair there too, leading from the bottom of his button to the top of his jeans.

"Let me see it," Bo said as he held out the loose piece of cotton.

Rusty knew what his brother was talking about, but he pulled his hand away and hid it from him. The pain resurfaced when he moved it, and it was like being jabbed repeatedly with a dull blade. The only comfortable position was to keep his fingers bent slightly, allowing the remaining skin to ravel like a rolled up carpet on his palm. He could smell the Bud soaking into his skin as if it were a sponge.

"Give it here." Bo reached for Rusty's hand.

Rusty didn't move his hand toward Bo, but didn't fight him either. He knew it was the best thing for the wound, but he also knew it was going to sting. Bo's moistened fingers grabbed onto Rusty's wrist and forced his hand toward him. Rusty offered up only minimal resistance, which was really only to satisfy his ego — he hated not at least fighting back, even if he knew he wasn't going to win. The pain that exploded through the open callus made Rusty scream into the openness of the field. It was a relief to do so, having kept it in so his father wouldn't hear it up close, but it didn't help to ease the pain. Bo kept his grip firm while he wrapped the torn piece of t-shirt around Rusty's hand as if it were a bow. There was just enough material remaining after going around thrice to tie a small knot, which he did.

“It’s too tight,” Rusty yelled, his hand pulsating. “It hurts!”

“It’ll be fine. It’s the only way it’ll heal.”

“It’s just gunna split open again anyway.”

“Don’t you remember what happened last time you got an infection?”

Rusty nodded. The scare with his thumb.

“Then quit your bitching.”

Rusty scrunched his face and pursed his lips at his brother, even though he knew he was right. Bo shook his head and turned back toward his plants, not engaging. He picked his hoe up off the ground and got back to work as if nothing happened.

Rusty bent over and stretched for the handle of his own hoe, grabbing onto the duct taped portion with his good hand. He’d forgotten all about it, but when he did, the wetness in his socks squelched. He felt the liquid starting to penetrate the holes in his work boots, saturating the socks underneath. He knew the smell between his toes would worsen before it got better. Rusty felt parched.

Next to the hoe and close to the empty beer can was the bottle of water that was supposed to last him the rest of the day. Rusty bent over again and picked it up, then brought the muddy rim to his lips and leaned his head back. Not even a single drop remained. He pulled the bottle from his lips, looked into the hole with one eye, and saw nothing but plastic staring back at him.

Empty.

Anger boiled under Rusty’s skin, and he threw the plastic bottle to the ground. He stomped on it with the heel of his boot until the plastic shrunk into the shape of an accordion, leaving a broken tamper ring and no

cap. Rusty found the cap a few feet away and kicked it with his other foot, sending it bouncing across the soil like a rock skipping on a river. He was so thirsty. And he hated his father for wasting the water for no reason.

Rusty sat on his backside in the sun and dropped his head. Tears welled up behind his eyelids, but he blinked them away. He found a leaf and rolled it between his fingers. And as much as he knew he shouldn't, he began to feel sorry for himself.

"What are you doing now?" Bo asked. He was in the row of plants next to the one Rusty was in.

"Nothing." Rusty kept his head down and tore the edges of the leaf away. He pulled it apart until he was left holding only the stem, tossing the small bits of green into the sky. They fell in his lap as the wind died out again. He eventually flicked the stem away too.

"Do you want dad to come out here again?" Bo said as he approached. "It's only going to be worse next time, you know."

"I can't do it, Bo. I can't do this. I'm not strong enough."

Bo sat down next to Rusty, their knees touching. "What are you talking about?"

Rusty held his arms out. "This. I'm not strong like you. My hands are all tore up and I'm out of water. I'm too weak. I'm not a man like you."

"You think my hands don't hurt too? They do."

"But they ain't all tore up like mine."

"Not anymore they ain't. But they used to be."

Rusty turned and faced his brother. "Really?"

"Of course. I was just like you when I was your age. I've just been doing it longer than you, so my hands

have gotten used to it, that's all." Bo turned his palms up and showed Rusty the scars.

Rusty stared at the scars and was reminded of the stories Bo told him — about how the blood used to drip onto the plants when his calluses opened; about how the sweat from his forehead would fall into the wounds and make his cuts sting as if they were on fire; about how Bo once drank his own urine when he was out of water but was still thirsty. Rusty sometimes forgot that Bo had been through it all before him and knew what it was like. He liked it when Bo told him stories in bed about what he'd been through, although it could only happen if and when their father passed out drunk. Bo's stories made Rusty realize that what Bo went through was so much worse than anything he'd ever know, simply because Bo had to do it all on his own; Rusty always had Bo there with him, always had Bo's wisdom and advice and protection. Bo had to learn it all on his own; he had to learn the hard way. Rusty regretted ever feeling bad for himself. Bo never did.

One of Lenny's rules was that there was no talking when in bed. But when he passed out he wouldn't know, and Rusty and Bo would sometimes be up all night when that happened, just talking. Ruby would stay up sometimes too, but she wouldn't make it very long. She would crawl in bed with Rusty, and they'd cuddle in the bottom bunk while Bo told stories from the top until Ruby fell asleep on Rusty's chest. The bottom bunk felt safe in those moments. It was as if the wooden frame above Rusty's head was a shield, and nothing dangerous or evil could penetrate it. It was like Rusty's own invisibility cloak; he couldn't do

magic, though. Their late-night talks were Rusty's favorite times. He felt like a kid then, and those were the moments when he found himself wishing for a better life, wondering if he'd ever find happiness outside the armor of the bottom bunk. They hadn't had one of those talks in quite a few weeks now.

"Don't worry," Bo said, "you'll become a man someday too."

"You think so?"

"I did." Bo smiled.

Rusty nodded.

"I even got hair down there," Bo said. "Wanna see?"

Rusty laughed and pushed his brother away from him as he leaned in. Bo laughed too while he pretended to unzip his pants and whip out his member. Rusty was glad to have his brother around to make him laugh.

"Wait here," Bo said, then he stood up. He wiped the dirt off his pants and started back toward the row of tobacco plants he'd been working on.

Rusty didn't respond. He just watched his brother, wondering what he was doing, admiring his strength. Looking at him, Rusty reconsidered whether he thought Bo was a man or not; maybe he was one already, after all.

Bo bent over and picked something off the ground, then came back toward Rusty. "Here, take it."

Rusty looked at the outstretched arm of his brother and saw a plastic bottle dangling before him, water sloshing underneath where the label should have been. Bo, as usual, had saved more than half of his water.

"That's yours."

“You can have it.”

“No, I can’t. It’s yours.”

“Just take it.” Bo said. He shoved the bottle into Rusty’s hands, forcing him to take it.

“Are you sure?”

Bo nodded.

Somehow, the water inside Bo’s bottle still felt cold in Rusty’s hands, despite the heat of the day, and his mouth began to salivate. He felt guilty for accepting Bo’s water since he’d be left with nothing if he got thirsty later, but Rusty’s mouth was really dry; he could hardly even swallow. With one final glance at his brother to make sure it was okay, Rusty unscrewed the cap with his good hand and poured the water into his mouth without touching his lips to the rim. Although he knew it couldn’t have been, the water felt as cold as ice on his tongue, like it’d just come from the Arctic. His teeth screamed at him when the cold hit them, the cavities in his molars untreated. Rusty swallowed hard and let the ice water lather his throat until it was smooth again. He guzzled until there was only a small sip left, then he handed the bottle back to Bo and exhaled. He felt so much better.

Bo took the bottle from Rusty and threw back the final sip, then screwed the cap back on and took off toward his row of plants. He turned back to Rusty and smiled. Then, without saying anything, he got back to work.

Rusty felt replenished, his muscles stronger and looser, his mood not as gloomy. Bo had a way to make him see the positive in every situation, even if finding a positive seemed impossible. Rusty admired Bo for that. He didn’t know how he’d ever be able to repay

him for everything he'd done for him, but he wanted to try, even if that meant starting out small. Rusty crouched down and grabbed the duct taped handle of the hoe, brushed the sand dust off, then stood back up and jammed the edge of the blade into a mound of soil. He was going to prove his worth to Bo, even if that meant he had to ignore the pain in his hand.

Just as Rusty was starting to gather some momentum in his work, the screen door on the porch of the trailer smashed against the post again, temporarily paralyzing him. All the water he just ingested left his body in a cold sweat, and the little hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Rusty clutched onto the duct tape and looked toward the trailer. He hoped his father wasn't still mad at him, although there was hardly ever a time when that was the case.

Instead of seeing his father on the porch, Rusty saw Ruby, and she was running toward him and Bo. It sounded as if she were crying, but Rusty couldn't tell for certain through her high-pitched screaming. A shiver of horror ran through Rusty's body when her voice hit his ears. Something was wrong, and he feared the worst. He couldn't get himself to believe it to be true, though. Ruby was too young. He knew it must have been something their father did, but he didn't want to imagine the possibilities. Rusty dropped the hoe and ran to where Bo was, closer to the trailer and to Ruby.

Ruby approached, still running, and definitely crying. She didn't stop until she ran into the outstretched arms of Bo, who caught her and wrapped his arms around her petite frame like a blanket. It was

only a moment later when Ruby pulled away, looked up, and Rusty saw her face up close.

He threw his hands over his mouth and gasped.

CHAPTER THREE

Open cuts and bloody abrasions covered Ruby's face with dots. Her skin was pinker than it usually was, her eyes wetter than they should have ever been. If Rusty didn't know any better, he might have thought the cuts were boils that had split, like his calluses. But Rusty knew better. He knew his sister's face wasn't like that earlier, and he knew immediately where they came from. There was only one person in the world who would have done that to such a sweet little girl like Ruby.

"What happened?" Rusty asked. His voice was shaky, frantic. He could feel the anger building within himself.

Ruby didn't say anything. She stood there, her hands dangling at her sides, tears streaming down her face, and sniffed. For as bad as her face must have hurt, she was stronger than Rusty thought. He felt like a wimp for reacting the way he did when their father poured his beer over his hand earlier.

"Did dad do this to you?" Bo asked. His face was red with boiling blood, and Rusty could tell he was trying to hold it back. Rusty caught a glimpse of Bo's hand as it slid downward and came to rest on his bent knee, shaking as if it were cold. Rusty thought he could feel the heat as it oozed from Bo's grime encrusted pores.

Ruby nodded. Bo dropped both knees into the soil and held Ruby in his arms. She lay against him and cried while Bo smoothed her braided hair with the

stroke of his hand. Rusty thought he heard a snuffle come from Bo, but he brushed it away. There was no way. Rusty had never seen Bo cry before.

Rusty stood off to the side by himself with his good hand shoved deep into his pocket, feeling the trapped particles of sand scraping against his fingertips. He didn't know what to do. He looked toward the trailer and expected to find his father on the porch, drunk and hideous and cowardly, but he didn't. Something felt off.

When everything fell quiet around him, Rusty heard the clanking of porcelain coming from inside the trailer. Then he thought he heard a glass shatter. The kitchen was on the other side of the exterior wall closest to him, just past the screened in porch, and Rusty expected Lenny to burst through it at any moment. He waited for his father to explode through the screen like a tormented bull, steam emanating from his flared nostrils. Rusty felt like a Torero holding the red flag, but he wanted to be a Matador. Now more than ever before.

Time crawled. The misery stood still. Rusty stared at the dirt. Once the sniffles and tears subsided completely, Ruby pushed herself away from Bo, using the side of her hand to dry her cheeks. Rusty looked at her again, good this time, and surveyed the damage even further. There was some discoloring on her forehead already, just above her left eye, where a bruise was starting to form. There was an egg on the opposite side of her face, and her lip was bloodied. There was a sprinkle of crusted blood in her nose too, but that could have been from an unrelated nosebleed — she got those from time to time. Either way, Ruby

was beaten up pretty good, and it made Rusty so angry. He dug his fingernails into his palm on his good hand and tightly clenched his jaw.

Lenny deserved to be punished for what he did. Ruby's just a girl.

"What did dad do?" Rusty said. He was surprised at the calmness and deepness of his voice. It sounded like he was a man already — controlled and confident, maybe even strong. It surprised him. Bo and Ruby seemed to notice too, because they both turned and faced him at the same time, and Rusty felt uncomfortable that all eyes were on him. "How many times?"

Ruby held up three fingers, keeping her thumb and pinky down below. Her lip quivered. Bo turned away, unable to look. Something happened inside Rusty's body that he'd never felt before. It caused his muscles to tense and his hands to tremble. Sweat beaded on his back and neck. His belly churned so hard he thought he'd shriek. He felt as if he were on the verge of exploding.

"Why?" Bo asked once he turned back around. He was still crouched. His hands were balled into fists near his boots.

"He was hungry," Ruby said. Even in spite of her injuries, her voice was as soft as a feather. She spoke with a gentle Kentucky accent, which, over the years, became as thick and heavy as everyone else in the family. The innocence in her voice made what Lenny did to her even more difficult for Rusty to imagine. She was a child, harmless. Innocent.

"He hit you because he was hungry?" Bo asked.

"...because I couldn't make him a sandwich."

Bo looked to Rusty and made a face. Rusty wasn't sure what it was supposed to mean.

"What do you mean you couldn't?" Bo said.

Ruby looked between Rusty and Bo, and she started to cry again. It was harder than it had been before, more like weeping, and she threw herself back into Bo's arms. Bo held and rocked her as if she were his own daughter, swaying to music that only he could hear. In many ways, he looked after her like she was his daughter — Rusty saw it. If it wasn't for Bo protecting her, there's no telling what Lenny might have do to her. Bo was the only father she ever had. Rusty too.

Across the field, the screen porch thrashed open and captured Rusty's attention again. He snapped his head toward the sound, anger still ratcheting through his veins. Lenny walked out onto the porch with a new beer in his hand and a burning cigarette in his mouth. Rusty knew it was homemade — he could smell the freshness of the tobacco that the rolled up ones his father sometimes bought didn't offer. Rusty could recognize that natural smell anywhere.

Lenny stepped out onto the top step and whipped something over the railing, toward the open patch of lawn. Rusty couldn't tell what it was from a distance, but it flew across the sky like a skeet disc. It spun like a record as the wind took ahold of it, then it began its descent just as quickly. The object shattered and exploded into a cloud of dust when it crashed into the surface.

Lenny slurred a drunken obscenity then slammed the door and went back inside. Even after he disappeared again, his voice still echoed through the

field, sending vibrations rushing through Rusty's boots, reminding him of the squishiness that molded his toes.

Rusty looked at Bo, who was covering Ruby's ears as their father's voice rumbled through the rows of tobacco plants. Bo was trying his best to shelter Ruby for as long he could, but Rusty couldn't help but feel it was all for naught. Ruby, by now, had heard worse things come out of Lenny's mouth. They all had.

As the echo faded and the field was left in silence, Rusty peered across to the other side, past the strip of grass where there weren't any plants, and out toward the second trailer. The trailer was on a separate flat on the same lot, and a single plum tree separated the two. The plums were just starting to ripen, turning from a soft red to a deep purple. From where Rusty stood, they looked as small as grapes. On the other side of the plum tree was the trailer their mother lived in, along with their grandpa. Rusty always thought the arrangement was strange, but he liked that he could see them both every day, even if it was just a wave. Lenny wouldn't let him or Bo or Ruby go over there much. Lenny seemed to have a major distaste for their mother, although Rusty didn't fully understand why.

Bo's voice broke Rusty's concentration. "Let's go."

Rusty faced his brother and was surprised to see Ruby standing alone, a few feet away. "Go where?"

"To the shed."

The sandpaper regrew inside of Rusty's throat and he found it difficult to breathe normally. "For what?" he said, gasping for air. "Dad will kill us if he finds out we went in there."

"Not if we kill him first."

Bo's words smashed Rusty in the chest, nearly sucking the rest of his wind. Rusty wasn't sure if Bo was being serious or not, but the look in his eye told Rusty to listen. Bo's eyes were glassed over and dark and drowning with passion. Even though he knew it was only his imagination playing tricks on him, Rusty swore he could see little flames burning inside Bo's pupils. Rusty was warm too, and his hand started to ache again. The piece of t-shirt wrapped around his callus didn't seem to be helping as much as he hoped it would.

"Dad hit Ruby because she wouldn't make him a sandwich," Bo said, in such a calm voice it was frightening. "Ruby's only six-years-old. She doesn't know how to make a sandwich. Dad won't even show her how to use a knife."

Rusty thought about it and nodded. He'd never seen Ruby make a sandwich before or use a knife to cut one in two, although he wondered if the two were even related. But he didn't dare question Bo, not right now, not when he was like this. Bo, it appeared, was serious about what he said before. He wanted to kill their father.

"He crossed the line this time, Rusty. It can't go on anymore."

Rusty tried to swallow the puddle of saliva filling his mouth, but he couldn't — his throat was too dry. Instead, he waited back while Bo took Ruby by the hand and led her toward the shed, then he spat into one of the plants. He took a peek over his shoulder at the trailer one more time, just to make sure, and when he saw the coast was clear, he hurried to catch up. Together, the three of them walked toward the shed in

unison, their backs facing their father's trailer, the pain of the years of abuse filling their heads.

As they approached the shed, Rusty knew his brother was right. They had to stop their father before things got any worse. They had to stop Lenny before it was too late.

Rusty was scared.

CHAPTER FOUR

The shed was unlocked. There was an old padlock on the outside of it, but it wasn't secured. The locking mechanism was rusted by all the years in the frigid ice and rain, and countless hours in the baking summer heat. Even the rounded parts looked sharp. Bo tore the lock from the door and threw it to the ground, discarding it like trash. Then he swung the door open and stepped inside, slipping into the darkness. Ruby went second. Rusty trailed.

It took Rusty's eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness of the shed. There were no lights inside. Lenny only came out here during the day when the sun was at its brightest through the one window on the far side, and now, Rusty understood why that was. Rusty and Ruby and Bo stood in a line next to one another, filling the entire length of the shed with their shoulders. Once Rusty's vision was clear, he took a look around. It was his first time inside his father's shed. His belly twisted with butterflies. He wondered where the door to Narnia was.

There was a chest-high table on wheels in the center of the shed that was probably only waist-high for his father. The floors were rotted and felt waterlogged under Rusty's feet, made worse by the similar feeling he had inside his boots. He wiggled his toes around to keep them fresh, but his socks dug deeper in the pits of his toes when he did, actually making it worse. Rusty cringed at the thought of the

hangnail on his big toe getting infected like his thumb did. He dodged a bullet once, and he questioned whether he'd be able to do it twice. He'd never been that lucky.

Rusty took a step toward the table and peeked at the top. On the table was a familiar leafy plant that smelled of dirt, and some chopped up tobacco that resembled shaved wood chips. Next to the loose tobacco was a white five-gallon bucket that was filled halfway with something of similar consistency as water. Except it wasn't water. Even the water he and Bo were given didn't look that bad. The liquid inside the bucket was tinted green and had bubbles foaming on the surface. It smelled radioactive, a likely combination of pesticides and ammonia. Rusty couldn't help but wonder if it was from another planet. Whatever it was, it made those plants he and Bo tended to grow like fungi on spoiled cheese.

Rusty sensed Ruby's presence behind him, felt her move close to him, as if she were afraid. Bo was fumbling around in the far corner, looking for something Rusty wasn't privy to. Rusty stepped away from the table and put his arm around Ruby's shoulder, pulling in her toward his belly, getting a whiff of cinnamon from her hair. He always found her hair to smell that way, which was odd, since he'd never heard of or seen cinnamon shampoo. Then he thought that maybe the cinnamon he smelled was because of her hair color — the shade of red was like cinnamon. If the scent of someone's hair had to do with the color of it, Rusty wondered what his would smell like. Chocolate was his first instinct — hopeful, perhaps — but he couldn't think of anything else brown that

smelled good; he could only think of the nastiest of them all. He hoped he didn't smell like that. He felt a tickle on his nose.

Bo moved from the corner and made his way further along the perimeter of the shed, his boots squelching as they sunk into the floorboards. Rusty didn't ask what he was looking for, although he was curious. Bo looked comfortable as he dug around the perimeter of the shed without hesitation, his hands and feet making noises that seemed to be in sync. Based on the way he moved, Rusty wondered if Bo had been inside the shed before — he didn't act the least bit afraid of getting caught.

Bo's foot crashed into something, toppling it over. He stopped, stood up straight, and took a step backward when it hit the floor, staring down at it as if it were a monster. The object was hidden from Rusty's view, but Bo's reaction scared him.

What if it was a monster?

Then Rusty heard it.

Heavy liquid sloshed as air pushed it outward. Plastic rattled against the floor as the liquid poured out, the volume intensifying as air bubbles pressed against it. The sound was familiar. Rusty closed his eyes and thought about it, trying to remember where he'd heard it before. It didn't take long. The memory rushed back as if it were surfing the wave of the spilled liquid. It overtook him, buckling his knees, causing his calves to tighten. It was the memory of the first time his father hit him.

Rusty was just a boy. Bo was working in the field and Ruby was still asleep in the back bedroom. Lenny locked himself in the bathroom and told Rusty he

needed some privacy. He did that often. It was almost noon and Rusty still hadn't been fed, and his belly kept making strange gurgling noises. Rusty found the cereal in the cabinet and retrieved a bowl without incident, but Lenny thrashed open the bathroom door and scared Rusty. The gallon of milk slipped from his grip and crashed against the floor of the trailer, just as he was about to pour it into the bowl. Rusty stood frozen in fear while Lenny cursed him out.

Rusty remembered not being able to move, too frightened of his father to even bend over and pick up the spill. Rusty's shoulders hunched as Lenny pressed two fingers into the back of his neck and forced him onto his knees. It took three smacks of his head against the linoleum for Rusty to finally open his mouth, and when he did, Lenny forced him to clean up the milk with his tongue.

Rusty vomited twice as he licked the floor. There were dust mites and rat turds under the stove that made him gag every time he inhaled. Between those smells and the taste of the milk and the blood from his forehead and the vomit-stained linoleum, Rusty tried and fought but lost, and he blacked out. When he awoke later on, Lenny sat at the kitchen table with a fresh light and a six-pack of empty cans next to him. He was calmer then, with less rage, but no less mean. He forced Rusty to strip off his shirt and use it as a mop for the now warm and spoiled milk. It mostly worked.

Rusty vomited a handful more times that day as the smell of the spoiled milk bled through his shirt and soiled his skin. Lenny forced him to wear the shirt for the rest of the day because he said it would teach

Rusty a lesson. Rusty never did know what the lesson was that day, unless it was to never touch the milk. If that was the case it worked, because Rusty hadn't picked up a gallon jug since that day, and he had no plans to do so anytime soon. The next morning, Bo took Rusty's shirt outside with him and buried it behind the trailer. Rusty could smell the spoiled milk on himself for days after, and it took weeks for him to even look at his father again. He joined Bo in the field later that summer, and they'd been at it every day since.

The memory of the first time made Rusty shiver with chills. He could never forget his first time.

Rusty tensed further as he thought of a fallen gallon of milk and what might happen if Lenny found out. But then he realized where they were and didn't think there'd be a gallon of milk in the shed, and so his mind wandered off into a different direction instead.

What if it was the substance that was inside the bucket? What happened if it got on them?

He thought about his thumb and cringed.

Rusty pulled Ruby closer to his chest and squeezed her tighter, just in case the spilled liquid made contact with mold or some of the furry fungus that lined the walls and caused it to grow into an alien. Rusty believed such things could happen.

Bo bent over and disappeared from sight, making Rusty tense even more. But then Bo reappeared, looking like himself and not an alien, and dropped something on the wheeled table. It rolled toward Rusty and Ruby slightly, which startled Rusty and made him stumble backward a couple steps.

"Ruby, come here," Bo said.

Rusty felt Ruby stiffen. He held her close.

“Hurry up. Before dad finds us out here.”

Rusty knew his brother was right about that. If Lenny found them out here, they’d be dead. All of them. He didn’t want to, but Rusty released Ruby and pushed her toward Bo. Ruby only resisted for a second before walking around the table and approaching Bo, her steps small and slow. Her neck was craned and her face looked at the floor as if she were readying herself to be scolded.

Rusty clenched his teeth in anger. Ruby was too young to be afraid of others already, and she never had a reason to be afraid of him or Bo. Lenny had scarred her.

Bo ripped off another piece of his shirt — this time from the back, after twisting it around to the front so he could grip it — and made it into a ball in the palm of his hand. Even though Bo was standing in front of the window and blocking most of the light, Rusty could see Bo’s shirt had been torn to the bottom of his ribcage. Before long, if this kept up, Bo would be shirtless.

Bo popped the cap off the jug he kicked over and put it on the table. Rusty hadn’t noticed what it was until now, still afraid of its possible alien origin. His eyes widened. Bo picked up the jug by its handle and tipped it overhand. The balled up shirt soaked up the liquid like an old sponge and whatever else was left dripped through Bo’s fingers and onto the rot beneath his feet. Bo crouched to Ruby’s level and applied the wet shirt to the cuts on her face. Ruby let him.

“What’s that?” Rusty asked. The liquid in the jug was clear, kind of like what he thought water was supposed to look like. The brown stuff he and Bo

drank was hardly clean enough to be considered water, although technically it was. He was sure now that the liquid Bo was applying to Ruby's face wasn't harmful — or otherwise Bo wouldn't be doing it — but he was still curious what it was. Bo is one person that would never hurt Ruby, no matter what.

"Water," Bo said, keeping his eyes on what he was doing. His concentration was sharp, as if he were performing surgery.

The sandpaper returned in Rusty's throat again, trying to suffocate him. He'd forgotten how thirsty he still was, and the mention of the fresh water made him crave it even more. He wasn't sure if he misheard Bo or if he was having a mirage, but Rusty felt as if he were surrounded by water. He saw himself swimming in the river, letting the water fill up his cheeks as he swam, felt his hair dampen. The callus on his hand began to sting from the pressure of the current of the river that pressed against it.

"Can I have some?" Rusty asked as he shook out of his daze. He used his good hand to check himself. He was still dry — the makeshift handkerchief too. It was just a daydream.

"Some of what?" Bo said.

"The water."

Bo didn't respond right away. He kept at his surgical precision until Ruby protested she had enough. When he finished, he wrung out the wad of shirt and let the water saturate the wooden floor even more than it already was. He jammed the clump of material into the back pocket of his jeans and said, "All right," then he pushed the jug toward Rusty.

Rusty stepped forward and reached for the jug. He hesitated for a moment as he looked at it, remembering how long it'd been since he picked one up. He thought again about what the consequences might be if he messed up again, but decided it was worth it. His throat was so parched it hurt.

Rusty's good hand was his off-hand, and the jug was heavier than he expected. His fingers wrapped around the handle and squeezed the plastic as hard as he could, but his muscles were tired and weak. The jug began to fall from his grip at once, the handle so slippery it could've been greased, and he used his bad hand to try to catch it. Rusty writhed in pain as the jug hit the softest part of his damaged palm and crashed to the floor beneath him. The callus burned like his hand was melting, and for a second Rusty thought it might actually be. He wrapped his good hand around his wrist and tried to squeeze to put an end to the throbbing, but it didn't help. His hand burned hotter and his fingers shook. If he wasn't so dehydrated he would have cried.

"Pick it up!" Bo cried. "Hurry, before it's all gone. That's the last jug."

Rusty heard his frantic brother and wanted to do as he said, but he couldn't. He closed his eyes and pulled his hand to his chest, cradling it with his good one. He dug his teeth into his lip and bit down. A taste of tin touched his tongue, and he knew that meant he'd gone too far. Even so, the pain of it was nothing compared to his hand.

"Why didn't you pick it up?" Bo asked as he stood in front of Rusty, breathing heavier than normal. His voice was low, and Rusty knew he was angry. Even

with the light at his back, Rusty could see Bo's face had reddened. Rusty's eyes met the jug, which was now back on the table, and noticed more than half of the water was gone.

"Sorry." Rusty clutched onto his hand and kept it still.

Bo seemed to understand. He nodded and left it at that without saying anything. It was as if he knew the pain Rusty was experiencing, as if he'd been through it himself. Rusty knew he had. Bo grabbed the jug of water with two hands and held it above Rusty's face. Rusty smiled at his brother and leaned his head back, allowing Bo to pour small amounts of water into his mouth like it were a funnel.

Rusty coughed and choked at first, the water pouring directly into his throat, but he eventually got the hang of it. He raised the back of his tongue so it would trap the water inside his mouth like it was a dam. When he was ready, he closed the dam and let the water rain down his throat like a waterfall. His body felt invigorated each time he did it.

Once Rusty's stomach was full and Ruby had a turn, Bo finished the jug off. There wasn't much left for him, maybe a half of a glass worth. Rusty felt guilty knowing he'd taken it mostly for himself — including the rest of Bo's bottle that he offered earlier — but Bo didn't seem bothered. Bo tossed the empty jug to the side and pulled Rusty and Ruby into a quiet embrace. Rusty's stomach felt full, maybe too much so. He felt bloated as if he were a balloon. He wondered what would happen if he popped.

Even though Bo's skin was warm against his own, Rusty didn't care. While he was still overheating

himself, Bo's touch made it all go away — all the emotional pain, all the physical pain, all the bad memories. Even his hand stopped aching for a time. Rusty hung on when Bo tried to pull away, but he was eventually overpowered — his good hand wasn't strong enough.

Bo crouched to Ruby's level and looked into her eyes. Rusty stood back, wishing Bo would look at him in the same way, though acknowledging Ruby needed it more than he did. Even so, he couldn't help that he still wanted it.

"I'm sorry what dad did to you," Bo said to Ruby. "But I promise he'll never hurt you again." Bo looked up at Rusty and they locked eyes briefly. "He'll never hurt any of us again."

Ruby's lip started to quiver again. Rusty felt a pinch in his throat too. He wondered what Bo was feeling.

Rusty didn't know what his brother meant by what he said exactly, but he liked the sound of it. The idea of Lenny never hurting him again was refreshing, a relief, like music to his ears. He could only hope it was true.

The three of them embraced again, harder this time, and held it for a while longer. Ruby cried. The softness of her whimpers were hard for Rusty to hear — they made him sad. He felt so bad for her, like he let her down, like he should have been there to protect her from their father. He suspected Bo felt the same way, although he doubted Bo would ever admit it — Bo didn't outwardly show sadness very often, even though Rusty knew he had to have it in him. Rusty certainly had plenty of it.

Rusty tried to stop his own tears from falling, but it wasn't as easy as he hoped. The pinching in his throat

worsened the harder he tried to fight off the tears. He held his breath while he fought with the knot that formed in his chest, but that wasn't much use. He eventually gave in and cried along with Ruby, though in silence. He hoped Bo wouldn't think less of him for giving in, for losing the battle within himself — he wanted Bo to think he was becoming a man, too, just like him.

When Ruby stopped whimpering and Rusty's own silent tears stopped, silence overtook the shed. Rusty heard one more snuffle, which definitely wasn't from him and was too deep to have come from Ruby, which meant one thing — it came from Bo. And while this wasn't the first time Rusty had heard his brother cry — the first time was in the field earlier — he still hadn't ever seen it. That was because Bo was almost a man, and men don't cry. Rusty used his shoulder to wipe his cheeks dry so no one would notice.

CHAPTER FIVE

There was a glimmer in Bo's eyes that sent angst shivering through Rusty's body. There was something about them, something dark, something almost evil. It was as if Bo were possessed by a demon. Maybe Lucifer. There was a coldness that surrounded Rusty and overtook him like a tidal wave. His chest became heavy, his breaths rapid. There was an emotionless, blank expression on Bo's face. The look meant something, something bad, and it frightened Rusty.

Ruby stepped out of the shed and back into the sunlight, leaving Bo and Rusty alone inside. The air was thinner with only two people occupying the space, but Rusty felt small. Something was up.

Bo's eyes shifted upward, directly over Rusty's head and in the direction of the door frame. Whatever was there, Bo was staring at it, his eyes unmoving, as if the demon inside him was trying to escape. Rusty desperately wanted his brother to snap out of whatever it was he was entrenched in, but he was too afraid to say anything. If he did, he feared whatever it was inside Bo might try to come after him instead, that it might overtake his soul and use his body as a costume and force him to perform evil. He worried he'd be turned into someone wicked, someone just like his father. Maybe that was why Lenny was like he was. Maybe Lenny was possessed by an evil spirit that was forcing him to treat Rusty and Bo and Ruby the way he did. That would explain it, if nothing else.

Out of fear of what might happen to him, Rusty stood very still. He avoided looking into his brother's eyes and tried to make himself invisible. He wished he was on the bottom bunk right now, where he'd be safe from the evil surrounding him. He wondered again where the hidden door was inside the shed and hoped he'd find it soon so he could escape to a new world before it was too late. He'd dreamed many nights about what might be on the other side.

"What dad did to me is one thing," Bo said, "and what he did to you, well, it sucks. But at least you and me can defend ourselves. Maybe not now, but someday. Someday we'll be just as big as he is, maybe even bigger. We can make him pay. But, Ruby..."

Rusty snuck a glance at Bo's eyes to see what was happening, and that's when he noticed Bo was no longer staring above Rusty's head. His head was turned and he was looking at the ground, his neck tilted, like someone experiencing deep emotional pain. He seemed to be agonizing over what to say next. Rusty bit his tongue to stop the lump that was growing in his throat from getting any bigger. He still wasn't sure where Bo was going with this, but he somehow felt pained too. Rusty had a feeling Bo was thinking about trying it again.

"But, Ruby," Bo continued, "she can't defend herself. She's just a girl. She'll always be a girl. Girls can't stand up to dad. Look what happened to mom."

Rusty considered that, nodding. He thought Bo might be right.

Bo looked up. "It's time," he said, with a calm resolve. "I think it's really time this time. It's gone on for too long."

A loud thump in Rusty's chest made his torso hurt. A kaleidoscope of butterflies flew blindly in his belly, each set of sputtering wings making him feel more nauseated than the one before. He wanted to say something, but the dryness of his throat put up a barricade that couldn't be penetrated. Even if he did say something, he wasn't convinced it would even matter. Bo, it seemed, had already made up his mind.

"Ruby," Bo yelled, startling Rusty. "Come in here."

Ruby popped her head inside the shed. The sun shone at her back, making the soft red covering on her head look almost orange. The abrasions on her face were darkened. Rusty smelled the cinnamon again.

"Ruby, I need you to stay in this shed for a while, all right? Close the door and put one of them shovels in between the door handles. Don't come out until me or Rusty comes and gets you, okay? Don't open the door for nobody, you hear?"

Ruby nodded without asking any questions. Rusty had plenty, but he didn't ask any either.

Bo found an empty five-gallon bucket in the corner and carried it toward the door. Rusty shuffled his feet and moved out of the way, unsure of what Bo was doing with it. Bo flipped the bucket over and dropped it on the floorboard, right in the center of the doorway. The plastic didn't clank when it hit the wood like Rusty expected it might, which was probably because the wood was so rotten and soft. The sound was more of a squelch, like a boot stepping onto a patch of soggy grass the day after a rainstorm.

Rusty held his breath, hoping Bo wouldn't fall right through the floor.

For the first time, Rusty saw what Bo was staring at earlier. Bo's outstretched arms reached for it, the tips of his toes providing the extra boost he needed, and wrapped his hands around it. There were two u-shaped hooks, both rusted, that were screwed into the wood above the door frame, each insulated with rubber for extra grip. The shotgun between them had a long black barrel with some corroded brown near the pump and a faded stock. The grip was worn so badly that the once glossy finish had turned matte. The brown had vanished almost entirely and had turned the same color as the barrel. Rusty could tell the shotgun had been used with regularity at one time or another.

Bo stepped down from the bucket, carefully cradling the shotgun in his palms as if it were a newborn baby. Rusty had never shot a gun before, never held one, but he knew all about them. When he was younger, before Lenny sent him out in the field with Bo, Rusty used to watch gun shows on TV with Lenny. While Lenny seemed to lack interest in most things, guns were different; guns were his passion. Rusty knew there were some guns hidden in the trailer and accessible by only the key that Lenny kept in the hip pocket of his jeans, but he'd never seen one up close before. The shotgun Bo held was an older pump-action style, twelve gauge, with two side-by-side barrels. The chambers were, in Rusty's estimation, three or three and a half inches.

"Let me see that," Rusty said, awed, reaching for the weapon.

Bo pulled it away and snapped his eyes in Rusty's direction. "What are you, stupid? That's how you get your hand blown off."

Rusty backed away and sank his shoulders. Bo turned his back to Rusty and held the shotgun into the sun. Rusty tried to look over Bo's shoulder to get a glimpse at the action, but by the time he heard the clank of the steel snap shut, it was too late.

"There's one shell left," Bo said, facing Rusty. "And I don't see any others lying around."

"What does that mean?"

Bo took his time answering the question. He looked between Rusty and Ruby as if being sure to take in their faces one last time. When it was Rusty's turn to capture his big brother's attention, he stared back. Bo's eyes were the same as they were before — overtaken by something evil, ignited flames bringing the moisture in the shed near a boil — although he no longer looked possessed. He looked in control.

That was even scarier.

There were two other occasions when Bo toyed with the idea of killing their father. The first time was after their mom left. That was many moons ago, so far in the past that it hardly even registered in Rusty's memory — some memories were stronger than others, he knew. She ran out one night, battered and bruised — just like Ruby now — and never came back. Their grandpa took her in. Bo brought up the idea of killing their father then, it being the first time he'd seen his mother being abused. But he was only eleven at the time, Rusty seven, so they didn't go through with it. They didn't even know how to execute it.

The second time was last Christmas. Lenny bought himself a new .22 and keg of Budweiser, but there were no gifts for the Rusty or Bo or Ruby. Bo always insisted to Rusty that it didn't bother him, that he didn't want gifts anyway. Rusty said he'd agreed, but he didn't really; he just didn't want Bo to think he was selfish. The look on Ruby's face that morning, when Lenny tapped the keg by seven o'clock and was passed out drunk before noon, was crushing. While she kept telling Rusty and Bo that she wasn't sad, the puddles of tears streaming down her face told a different story. She cried herself to sleep that afternoon while Rusty and Bo stood outside the door and listened. Rusty remembered how sick to his stomach he'd felt, how angry. The first time they actually tried to kill their father came after that.

Bo found some rat poison in the cupboard and mixed some of the powder into their father's open can, but it didn't work. Lenny was violently ill that night and covered the bathroom with vomit and regurgitated beer, but he was still alive. Thankfully, Lenny wasn't suspicious, assuming it to be a stomach bug — one was going around at school, so it made sense that he could have gotten it from Rusty or Bo. Even still, both Rusty and Bo were too scared to try it again. If their father ever found out what really happened, Rusty doubted they'd still be here. And if they were successful, in hindsight, the prospect of the three of them — Rusty, Bo, and Ruby — being separated by the state was enough to make them drop the idea fast.

Until now.

This time felt different. Rusty was sure of it. While he and Bo did try it one time before, the detached expression on Bo's face told him this time it was real. This time, without question, would be more than an attempt. It had to work or they wouldn't be around much longer. It was a matter of life or death.

"What it means," Bo finally said, his voice gritty, "is we only have one shot. And we can't miss."

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