

ARTIST'S BRUSH

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Tanya shoved the attic door closed with her butt then slid to the floor and held her little brother Jake. She rocked him back and forth, drying his tears with an old tissue she found in the pocket of her shorts.

"It's okay," she crooned. "We're safe here."

She loved this old attic with its worn floorboards and musty smells. The paintings she'd been working on latched onto her mind. She stood and led her sniffling brother to the hidden panel, both careful to avoid the loose floorboard that made a sound like a tortured cat when stepped on. She pressed her fingertips into the niche and opened the hidden panel that stood as tall as her waist.

The hidey place. She stooped to enter. Inside this small space, canvases leaned against the wall, some new and white, others painted in various stages of completion. She took one from its resting place and stepped from the hidey place to study it.

In this painting, she had used brilliant orange, red, and gold watercolors to make the autumn trees come to life. She could almost hear the calming sound of the brook as it flooded across the stones, and she smiled at her handiwork. Her mother encouraged her to paint, Tanya's one special talent, but *he* didn't like it so she had to hide out up here. That awful man destroyed anything he could get his hands on, especially when he was drunk, but he'd never ventured into the attic.

She closed her eyes and imagined herself sitting on the brook's bank as the cool water made its way across her dangling feet. This painting was nearly finished and she thought it one of her best. All it needed was a few touchups.

Jake sniffed, pulling her back to reality. Her mother's muffled cries drifted up the stairs. The fights between the adults rang through the thin walls of their old house, permeating every room.

Tanya placed a hand on her brother's head and stroked his sandy hair. She fought a shiver at the thought of her mother's boyfriend and what was happening downstairs right now. Over and over, she could hear her mother's voice in her head. *If he ever leaves us, I won't bring another like him into this house. I promise.* Oh, how Tanya longed for that day, but she didn't think it would ever come. He would run off, for days sometimes, but he always came back.

The man seemed perfectly nice until the day he moved in. Since then, Tanya and her mother had put up with his unpredictable behavior. Today, for the first time, he'd turned his anger on Jake. Their mother tried to intervene, tried to fight back, but the man became more

violent and destructive. He was especially hard to deal with when he drank and he'd been into the alcohol all morning.

Mama deserves better. Hell, Jake and I deserve better.

Tanya and Jake used to invited friends to meals and sleepovers, until *he* moved in. On nice days, she had painted outside on the cool grass, until *he* came here to live. The family had driven into town for ice cream and movies, until *he* showed up. Her jaw tightened and she noticed her brother had stopped crying.

"Don't you worry 'bout a thing, Jake. I have a plan."

She reached into the hidey place and scooped up a wallet. Her earnings from previous paintings she'd sold at the local craft fair.

Jake's eyes widened when he saw the money. "What're you gonna do, Sissy?"

Satisfied the contents were untouched, she put the wallet back. "You'll see."

An idea had come to her in her dreams several days ago. The plan was risky, perhaps even impossible, but she was willing to try it. Thoughts whirled around in her head as she put the cheery painting back and took out another canvas. This one, also near completion, reflected her fears, her nightmares, and she wanted to finish it, *needed* to finish it.

Jake sat on the floor with one of his toy cars as she moved to the window and leaned the canvas against the wall. Outside, the sun was about an hour before zenith. She squinted from the glare off the broken-down truck and empty beer cans strewn around the unkempt yard. The tree-lined road that ran in front of their two acres led into town, and she longed for the days when her mother took them shopping or to the movies. Those were happy times.

"What're you lookin' at, Sissy?"

"Freedom," she said. She lifted her brother up and sat him on her hip so he could see.

"Freedom," Jake mimicked. One small hand fingered the windowsill.

Tanya set her brother down and flopped onto her bottom to study the canvas. She breathed in the stale, musty air of the attic and held it in her lungs as long as she could before taking up a paintbrush.

Jake sat next to her and wrapped arms tightly around her middle. "You're a good painter, Sissy."

She forced a smile. "Thank you."

She began furiously mixing and painting, letting her feelings take over. Stroke after stroke, dab after dab, browns, grays, and blacks. These trees she made naked, bare, stripped of everything like a stark winter. The way she felt. The sky, she painted dark with clouds, gloomy and foreboding. A coming storm.

Outside, the sun traveled higher. Tanya leaned back and adjusted the barrette that threatened to slip out of her hair. Just a little more work and it would be done. For lunch, she and Jake ate stale bread with peanut butter and drank warm soda she'd stashed in the hidey place. Afterward, she got back to work while her brother napped on one of the old sheets.

She would feel better when this painting was complete, her suffering put onto canvas instead of eating away inside her. Her hand cramped several times but she simply shook it out and continued.

Jake awoke sometime later and relieved himself in the old paint can. Tanya ignored her bladder. She didn't want to go downstairs. Things would grow quiet, like now, then the fighting would start up again. A cycle she knew all too well.

Jake sat beside her and tucked his legs beneath him as he studied her work. "You're a good painter, Sissy," he said.

She smiled. "Thanks."

A few more brush strokes and she was finished. The light outside was fading so she flipped on the bare bulb that hung from the ceiling, leaned the painting against the wall, and sat back to admire her work. A forest of barren trees, bending in the strong winds against a dark sky. Rock and dirt on the ground, no grass, no flowers, devoid of life. The way *he* made her feel.

"Sissy!" Jake said, tapping her arm and looking toward the attic door. Fear etched his small features.

Heavy footsteps thumped somewhere near the bottom of the stairs, and the angry grumblings of her mother's boyfriend found Tanya's ears.

He's never come into the attic. He won't come in. He won't come in. Will he? She scrubbed her hands on an old rag and Jake helped get her paints and brushes into the hidey place. Her latest canvas, she left right where it was, displaying her emotions. She wouldn't cover this one, wouldn't hide it, not this time.

"I know you're up there! You come down right now or I'll come up there and give you both a lickin' you won't ever forget!"

She glanced at her brother's frightened face then back to the door. She held her breath and grabbed onto Jake as heavy footsteps made their way up the wooden stairs. *Oh, God, he's coming in this time.* Her heart made a frantic beat against her ribs. Thunder flooded her ears and she swallowed to find her mouth dry.

"Time's up!" the voice behind the door cried. An angry man stepped into the attic, bloodshot eyes fierce and fixed on Tanya. "I'm gonna teach you a lesson for running from me." His speech was slurred. "Get over here right now!"

She backed up, taking her brother with her. Her leg touched the edge of her newly painted canvas and she sucked in her breath, realizing she and Jake were backed against the wall. Trapped!

"Leave us alone," she pleaded, holding her brother tight against her side.

"Don't tell me what to do, you little bitch," the man said. He staggered after them, a belt dangling from one hand.

She pushed her brother behind her but she wasn't quick enough. The man captured Jake, snatched him from her grasp and raised his other arm, ready to strike.

"No!" she screamed as she ran to save her brother.

The belt slapped her hard across the cheek. She landed on the floor, dazed for a second, then scrambled back up again. This time she got a firm grip on Jake's arm, and with one strong yank, freed him.

The man whirled around. He smelled of stale beer and Tanya swallowed to keep herself from gagging. He lunged at her. She ducked out of the way of his reaching hands, taking Jake with her.

You have to end this, she told herself. *You have to do it now.*

She positioned herself behind the staggering man, took in a quick breath for braveness, and shoved him as hard as she could. Unable to keep his balance, he fell against her painting and disappeared into the canvas.

Tanya's heart raced and she panted. Jake, tears staining his cheeks and mouth open in shock, pushed his hand into hers. They stared into the painting. A small man stood near one of the barren trees, a belt dangling from one hand and tiny eyes darting back and forth in terror. The miniature mouth opened and closed but Tanya couldn't hear a thing. The man faded from

view, leaving only the bare trees and dark skies, just the way she'd painted them.

It worked. Just like in my dream. It really worked! She stepped closer and studied her artwork a moment, relief flooding her. With a smile, she turned to her brother and said, "He won't bother us ever again, Jake."

The boy grinned up at her. "You're a really good painter, Sissy."

She chuckled and led him out of the attic. "Mama?" she said as they descended the stairs. "Where are you?" No one answered and her heart hammered against her ribs. She led Jake into the family room. "Mama!"

"Out here," her mother called from the back patio.

Relief flooded Tanya and she let out a hard breath. The woman was alive. She wouldn't ask questions about her missing boyfriend. He'd run off before. And next month was the local craft fair. Her mother always enjoyed going, and Tanya had new paintings to sell this year. In fact, her friend Stacy had a terrible uncle who got mean when he drank. That nasty man never missed the fair.

Tanya smiled and quickened her steps toward the back door. Tomorrow, she'd set her paints up outside.

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