

*“We all hold a beast inside. The only difference is  
what form it takes when freed.”*



# ONE

A strangled scream accompanied the gratifying crunch of breaking bones.

“We gotta go,” Moth said, turning the pockets of the guy at his feet.

Rain relaxed his fists and stared down at the thug he’d been pounding. Blood pulsed under the swastika inked on the guy’s temple, making the tattoo move like a living thing. He wanted to kill it.

From beyond the park, a siren wailed.

“Seriously, dude. Drop it.” Moth’s voice was as shrill as the siren.

A quick glance over his shoulder confirmed the girl, huddled against the wire mesh trash can overflowing with beer bottles and garbage, was okay—well, alive at least, which might not have been true if things had gone down differently.

Even in the dark, he could tell she wasn’t from this part of Houston. Girls from this inner-city neighborhood had a harder edge. She was a few years younger than him, closer to Moth’s age—maybe fifteen or sixteen—dark, terrified eyes pleading above the duct tape strapped across her mouth and chin and all the way around her head. Her wrists were bound with zip ties behind her back.

God only knew what the assholes’ plan for her had

been, if they'd had a plan at all. These guys often acted spontaneously and indiscriminately—ironic for a group powered by discrimination. He gave the one at his feet a hard kick in the ribs for good measure but only received a weak moan in response. Good. The bastard wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

“Rain!” Moth's tone bordered on panic.

“Yeah.” He examined his bloody knuckles in the moonlight and his stomach turned over. The guy had better not die. Rain's DNA was all over him. With one last glance at the girl, he followed Moth into the dark moon shadows of the heavy oaks lining the back edge of the park, where he paused to watch the police cruiser skid to a halt. Only when he was sure the girl was in the care of the cops did his sense of self-preservation kick in, and he leaped the back fence of the park into the adjoining churchyard.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Moth hissed through his teeth. “We almost got caught.”

Gravel on the walkway behind the church crackled like Rice Krispies under his boots. He liked Rice Krispies. They served them every morning at the shelter.

He fell into step beside his friend, who was at least a head shorter. Rain had always been grateful for his size. He was taller and bulkier than most, so people left him alone as a general rule. That wasn't true of Moth. “You should get off the streets,” Rain said.

Moth replied with a go-to-hell glare.

Slinking into the shadows that clung to the side of the building, they had a clear shot to the other end of the churchyard. They emerged on a side street, slowed, and assumed their typical defiant, don't-give-a-shit teen thug personas, which fit Moth like a glove.

“But I like the streets,” he said as they neared the corner.

“I’ve got freedom here.”

Yeah, freedom until one of the gangs or the cops or worse found the chance to grab him up.

When they passed the bus stop, Old Jim wasn’t stretched out on the bench like he’d been every night since Rain and his mom had moved in down the street three months ago. Jim’s bag was there, though, tucked under the bench next to his blanket. He never went anywhere without his stuff.

“Oh, cool. Let’s see what the old guy guards like a pit bull.” But before Moth could get his hands on the backpack, Rain shoved him against the wall of the bus stop rain shelter, causing the graffiti-covered Plexiglas panels to rattle in their metal frames like thunder.

“No. Don’t touch his shit.”

Moth nonchalantly brushed his T-shirt as if he’d gotten crumbs on it, but Rain knew he’d surprised him and it was a nervous gesture. He fluttered when rattled, hence his nickname. “Since when have you been so righteous, Rain?”

“Since when have you been—” A siren drowned out his voice.

“Jeezus, I thought that was the cops for a second.” Moth’s fingers twitched at his chest as an ambulance sped past and then slowed to turn at the light a block up.

Red and blue lights pulsed across the surface of the boarded-up Family Dollar store on the far side of the intersection as the vehicle made the turn.

“I hope it’s not Old Jim,” Rain said.

For a long time, his friend studied him, then wiped the bottom of his shirt over his face, smearing dirt, rather than wiping it away. “You’re acting weird tonight.” He struck out up the street, not looking back as he spoke. “Really weird. You almost killed a guy back there, but you’re worried about an old dude who sleeps at the stop?”

It must be nice to be so callous—to be Moth. To see things

only in terms of what could serve a purpose. Somehow, even after all this time, Rain couldn't do it—couldn't give in to the every-man-for-himself hopelessness surrounding him like a cage. There was a way out of here. There had to be. And that's why he got on that school bus every morning and didn't drop out, like Moth, Dig, Twitchy, and the others in his loosely formed gang of non-gangsters.

"The only reason I beat the skinhead is because he was gonna hurt that girl." Regret spiraled through him as the adrenaline burned off, leaving him weak and nauseated. He usually had better control, but seeing those guys dragging that girl...

Moth stopped and smirked. "Riiiiiiight. Because it wasn't fun at all."

Remorse churned to life again in Rain's gut, and his hands shook. He hated feeling this out of control. Maybe he was screwed up because he hadn't eaten all day. Hopefully his mom had saved him some food at the shelter. "Beating those guys was fun to you?"

Moth shrugged. "Yeah. Of course it was."

Turning the corner, Rain glanced back at the stop and sighed with relief. Old Jim was back on his bench. He must've been off taking a piss or something. The man gave him a thumbs-up, then flipped the bird at Moth. Clearly, he hadn't wandered off too far to keep an eye on his stuff.

After turning the corner, both of them stopped short in the middle of the sidewalk.

"Oh shit," Moth said.

Not only was an ambulance in front of the shelter where Rain and his mother lived, several police cruisers were parked at odd angles to the curb, like they'd come down the one-way street the wrong way. Kind of like Rain had lived every day of his life.

"We need to split," Moth said, turning to run the way they'd come.

“No.”

Moth grabbed the back of Rain’s shirt and pulled. “No? Are you out of your mind? They’re here to pin us for beating those guys in the park.”

A paramedic rolled a gurney out the front door, and even from a block away, Rain knew exactly who was on it from her almost skeletal build and bright-red hair.

“They’re here to bust us.” The younger boy’s voice bordered on a whine.

“That’s my mom.”

Fluttering fingers tightened in the fabric of his shirt. “She probably got loaded and passed out in the hall. C’mon, Rain, let’s go.”

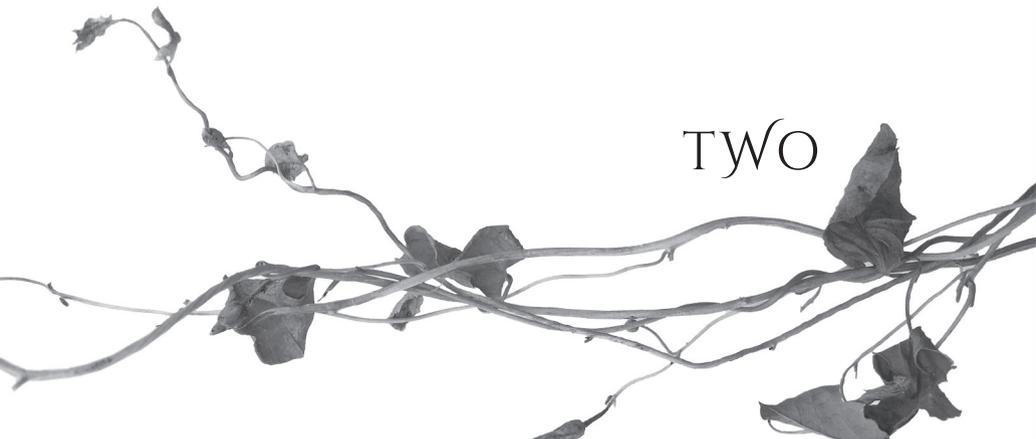
She probably *had* overdone it again, but he couldn’t just run away. Pulling his friend with him, he flattened against the side of the building.

Moth had a family on the other side of town he could go to. Even if he didn’t want them, they were there. Mom was all Rain had. Ideal or not, she was it. This time when his stomach rolled over, it wasn’t from hunger or anger; it was from dread.

A paramedic spoke with two of the officers. Miss Gill, the lady who answered the phone at the shelter, joined them, wringing a tissue in her hands. She scanned the street in both directions, and he motioned to his friend to stop fidgeting as they blended further into the shadows. Shoving the tissue in her pocket, she said something to the men. In unison, they turned and looked in Moth and Rain’s direction.

“Fuck you, man. I’m out,” Moth called as he ran back down the street the other way.

Rain’s heart hammered in his chest until he thought he might vomit, and then, right as he made up his mind to run, too, the paramedic pulled the sheet over his mother’s face.



## TWO

With a gasp of diesel fumes, the Greyhound bus pulled away from the stop at the Stripes gas station, leaving Rain completely alone for the first time he could remember. There had always been someone around—his mom, the person in the next bunk at the shelter, a kid in the next desk at school or the neighboring cell in juvie.

Stuffed in a cramped seat between the window and a guy who talked on his phone the entire five-hour trip had left him stiff. He shifted his duffel bag to his other shoulder and stretched, spine popping twice like brittle twigs.

The sun had set hours ago, and the moon hung low and fat in the night sky, illuminating the trailer park across the side street to the west and an empty pasture just beyond.

Checking out the gas station, he shook his head at his usual shitty luck. The word “closed” blinked rapidly in time to his hammering heartbeat from a lit sign in the station window. Ordinarily, it took a pretty big badass to rattle Rain, but for some reason, the prospect of meeting his mom’s sister for the first time gave him the jitters.

He leaned against the rustic wooden post at the front of the building and let his bag slide from his shoulder to the pavement with a *thud*. At his court hearing, the judge ordered him into the custody of his next of kin, since he wasn’t of legal

age. Hell, he hadn't even known he had a next of kin other than his mom. Then a social worker handed him an envelope containing a letter on frilly pink paper from someone calling herself "Aunt Ruby," who said she couldn't wait to meet him and would pick him up here, tonight. The envelope even included the bus ticket to a tiny town in the middle of the Texas Hill Country and some cash.

He scanned the empty parking lot in front and the crop field to his right. Bugs made a racket all around, rivaling the sound of the traffic on the Pierce Elevated overpass back home where his group of guys usually hung out. They were probably there now, planning how to get enough cash to score a six-pack or something harder.

He didn't miss them. He didn't miss any of his life, really, especially the last year. Time had simply been a bookmark. Something that held his place while he waited to finish the story.

Sucking in a breath of warm air, he rolled his shoulders to release tension. At least he didn't have to worry about retaliation from the skinheads anymore. Nothing in this small town could hold a candle to that kind of threat. Hell, kids around here most likely didn't even know what real danger was. Their biggest concerns were probably falling off a tractor or getting rained out of the high school football game.

A semi hummed and rattled on the main highway in the distance, then faded, leaving him alone with the bug chatter.

What if this Aunt Ruby person had forgotten this was the day he'd arrive? Maybe his social worker had filled her in and she'd changed her mind. He knew no one here. This town was so small it probably didn't even have a shelter. A siren wailed in the distance, maybe on the highway. They had cops, though, and probably a jail.

"Whatever," he muttered, feeling anything but noncommit-

tal. “Squid ink,” his mom had called it when he said something that covered up how he really felt.

“Yeah, whatever,” he said again, kicking a pebble toward the gas pumps standing guard in the flickering fluorescent lights under the overhang.

The bugs in the crop field to his right fell silent, and a bird spooked to flight from somewhere in the middle, catching air with a wild flapping of wings. He held his breath, but only silence followed. Probably a feral cat had scared it. Happened with the pigeons in the city all the time.

“Whatever.”

The hair on the back of his neck prickled as he waited for the bugs to kick back up with their radio static. Nothing but insects far off in the distance, a car passing up on the main highway, and the relentless hum of the fluorescent tubes over the gas pumps.

He grabbed his bag and slung it over his shoulder, searching the area for what had stood his hair on end. He had a great sixth sense about danger—he always had—and something was off.

The silence out here in the middle of nowhere was unnerving. At least in the city he knew what to listen for.

With light steps, he crossed to the far end of the building toward the field where the bird had spooked. It might’ve been a trick of the eerie light from the moon, but it appeared something was moving through the rows of what looked like waist-high corn. Not tall enough to clear the tops but big enough to cause ripples as it parted the stalks in its path.

“Probably sheep or goats,” he told himself, heart pounding.

Then, with a screech and flapping of wings as loud as hand claps, a whole flock of birds burst from the field, dashing over his head, causing him to instinctively duck and cover but only for a moment. Whatever had startled them needed to be faced

straight on, not in a cowering ball.

Leaving the bag on the ground, he unfurled from his crouch, fists at the ready, feet apart, knees slightly bent as he'd done hundreds of times. Adrenaline pumped through his body in a familiar, heated wave, readying him for the fight.

But no fight came. The stalks remained still, except for a slight swaying from a gentle breeze. After a few minutes, the bugs cranked up again with their grating song, and he took a deep breath.

“What-fucking-ever.”

He picked up his bag and wandered again to the front of the building. Headlights approached from the side street. The familiar shape of a Crown Vic with overheads sent him slinking back to the far end of the station, where he ducked behind the dumpster. He heard the police cruiser slow, followed by the grind of wheels turning on loose gravel as it pulled into the parking lot. *What now?*

Motor still running, a woman's voice called: “Aaron? Aaron Ryland?”

How did the cops in New Wurzburg get his name? His aunt was the only one who knew he was coming. His eyes flitted to the cornfield. For a brief moment, he considered taking off and leaving this whole court-ordered mess behind. But experience had taught him that facing shit head on was usually best, so he took a deep breath and stayed put.

The engine cut off, and the car door opened with a metallic groan. “Aaron, it's me, Aunt Ruby.”

*Sonofabitch.* She'd brought the cops with her to pick him up. What had the social worker told her about him?

“Aaron? Was that you I saw a minute ago?”

Well, he couldn't lurk in the shadows all night. She'd obviously seen him before he bolted. “Yeah. I'm...” What the hell could he say to explain why he was hiding behind

the dumpster? “Uh, yeah. Be right there.”

Behind him, the corn-looking stuff rustled, and he experienced the spider-crawling-up-the-back-of-his-neck feeling he got when he was being watched.

“Fuck off,” he growled at the corn, feeling like the dumb-ass he would have appeared if anyone were close enough to actually hear. “Seriously, fuck off and go scare some more little birdies. You don’t want to mess with me.”

The field answered with silence and stillness. Probably because there was nothing there. He shook his head. He hadn’t slept more than a few short spurts in days, which would explain why he was issuing threats to cornfields. Hopefully, a bed was in his near future, even if it was at the police station.

Time to get on it. “Hey, sorry I held you up, I...” He stopped dead in his tracks as he rounded the corner.

Leaning against the police cruiser was a dead ringer for his deceased mom. Freaky doppelganger stuff, only where his mom had been sickly with sunken shadows under her glassy eyes, this woman was healthy and alert. Her red hair was pulled back in a severe bun on the back of her head, and she wore blue or black cop garb—it was hard to tell in the flickering fluorescent-enhanced moonlight.

“Holy shit.” The words came out before he could stop himself.

The woman looked as stunned as he felt. “Yeah, holy shit is right.” She pushed away from where she’d been leaning against the car and hooked her thumbs in her gun belt, never taking her eyes off him. “You look exactly like your father. Scary, even. God, for a minute, I...” She looked away for a moment, blinking rapidly. After a deep breath, she met his gaze again and extended her hand. “I’m your aunt Ruby. I’m sorry, I thought you knew. Your mom and I are...” A line creased her brow

making her seem older, somehow. “We *were* twins.”

His mom had a twin. His chest tightened. Why hadn’t she told him? He took Ruby’s offered hand and shook, surprised by her firm grip. “Nice to meet you. Thanks for the bus ticket.”

She stepped back and looked him up and down. “It’s uncanny, the resemblance.”

“You knew my dad?” His mother had never spoken of him other than to say he knocked her up and then died.

Her eyes narrowed as she studied the field behind him. “Let’s talk about this somewhere else.” She gestured to the car with a tilt of her head. “You hungry?”

“Yeah.” He followed her to the cruiser with its driver door still open.

“Good. My neighbor Sharon dropped off some pot roast and lemon pie at the house. Let’s hit it.” She slid into the driver’s seat as he strode to the other side, stopping next to the door.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” she asked through the open window.

It was impossible to hold back his goofy grin as he climbed into the passenger seat. Aunt Ruby chuckled and delivered a friendly punch to his shoulder. “First time in a police car?”

He barked a laugh. “No. First time in the front.” He regretted saying it the second it came out of his mouth, but the tension in his shoulders lessened when her smile broadened.

She stared at him a moment before putting the car in gear. “More like your old man than simply looks, then.”

Rain’s jaw clenched at the mention of the father he’d never known. He fought back the urge to grill this stranger with the dozens of questions he’d wanted to ask since he could talk. Taking a deep breath through his nose, he consciously relaxed. His questions had gone unanswered for his entire

life. They could wait one more day.

As they pulled out of the parking lot, he glanced back at the cornfield. It was probably the reflection of the lights from the trailer park on the rear window glass, but a chill skittered down Rain's spine at the possibility the shiny gold dots among the stalks were actually multiple pairs of eyes watching them drive away.