

Me and
Jake

A NOVEL

BOO RILEY

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Dedication

To Anthony, Floyd, and children like them. To Jesus,
Who hears their cries.

1

The rattle of Dad's old pickup lingered long after the taillights disappeared into the darkness. Cameron stared after it. I stared after it. I'd heard twins think alike, and it must have been true because there we stood, like statues in the cool morning.

A pair of goats had more sense.

I let my right hand rest on Jake's head. My one-eyed Black and Tan Coonhound was never far from me. "What now?" I asked. Like I didn't already know the answer.

"What time is it?" my brother whispered.

I shrugged. He knew I didn't own a watch, but he asked anyway. "Morning time. Real early, I think, but maybe not. Clouds might be hiding the first rays. No stars out and all. Why are you whispering?"

Cameron let out a hard breath and looked up at the black sky. "I don't want to wake up. We got to bed just shy of eleven. I don't feel like I slept an hour before Dad yelled at us. I wonder what's stuck in his craw. Did you hear anything he said to Momma Ray before we left? I didn't."

Our stepmom demanded we call her Momma Ray. "I heard 'em talking, but all lovey-dovey, with Dad sipping coffee between times. They sound like a tractor tire hissing air around a nail, whispering back and forth at each other. You know they don't have us in mind when they do all that mushy stuff."

"Yeah, you're right."

"Let's get cranked up and cut some hay."

"Um, wait. What's that noise? T, I think your angel is on the run?"

Everyone called me Ty but my brother. I liked it that way.

I looked down to my right, then behind us. What in the world? Jake had slipped out from under my hand and walked away without me knowing. "Jake is an angel. Only looks like a dog."

"Brother, we're fourteen, nearly fifteen. Angels and coon dogs? Come on. That's fairytale stuff."

"Well, how do you explain—?"

"I don't have to. I'm not the one who thinks an old flop-eared hound's an angel."

My beliefs about Jake were an ongoing subject Cameron wouldn't let be. Cameron's anger was quick to flare up. He was lucky I wasn't like him. His nose would've been bloody about then.

A deep bay echoed across the hayfield. Jake knew I was looking for him and hollered to let me know what he was up to.

Cameron elbowed me. "T, I'll bet Jake's on a coon. Let's go!"

Just because a coonhound has *coon* in his name doesn't mean he's limited to chasing only masked bandits. Given the chance, Jake was apt to go after any critter that had legs to run on. Rabbits, squirrels, deer, bobcats and even a stray housecat could attract his attention.

Most times, I'd be the first one to run off and chase critters with Jake, but...Dad would show up again soon, sure as shooting, and he'd know by looking at the field we'd been playing around instead of tending

to his business. "What about mowing? Dad said—"

"You didn't listen. Dad said to cut hay when the sun comes up. The sun ain't up. I'm taking him at his word. Let's have some fun for once."

Cameron made a lot of sense.

I hoped Jake hadn't jumped a deer. They don't tree. They keep running and running and running.

Jake could howl the bark off an oak tree when he got to going and made it easy to follow his line of travel. His bark led us across the pasture.

The sun was closer to coming up than I thought. Before we entered the trees at a run, I could see good enough to avoid low limbs, rocks, and tree trunks. And it was cloudy. Low and wispy, like fog, only higher, the kind Dad always said would burn off as soon as the sun came up.

The ridge across the north side of our pasture rose to our front. I pointed left, cut right, and yelled back at Cameron. "Go that way. I'll circle in case they cross the top. Meet me at the pond."

Cameron and I knew the country around our pasture. We had explored the woods with Jake many times. If I could make the top of the ridge before Jake chased his prey up the hill, I could call him off.

We didn't own a gun, so we chased coons just to hear Jake's voice. Maybe, too, we liked to run for the fun of it, free of the everyday chores that took up all of our time. If the coon treed, Jake would give him a good what-for, howling out of frustration because the chase was over, and we could get back to the hayfield and go to work.

My heartbeat kept pace with my feet as I pounded up the steep ground between rocks and trees. Bushes and tall grass shed the morning dew and soaked my

britches. Once on top, I stopped to catch my breath and listen to Jake's ramblings below. The coon was leading him in a circle. Jake's bark echoed in the cool morning air and sounded like two dogs on the hunt.

Then, the biggest ruckus broke loose. Screaming and howling the likes I never heard before erupted. The hair jumped up on my head and goose bumps popped out on me from head to toe. What in the world? It sounded like Jake caught the boogiemán. I headed back down the hill as fast as I could run.

The pond wasn't big. About fifty paces across. Cameron and I had visited the little water hole many times for a drink when we could escape the hayfield without Dad catching us. Sometimes the water was clear, most times not. The smell of mud, rotten plants, and frogs and such made me wonder how I'd put my lips in it for a long drink so many times before.

The woods opened up and the pond came into view. Jake swam around in the middle, like he couldn't make up his mind which way to go. A big coon scurried out of the water and disappeared into the bushes on the opposite bank. To Jake's left, another critter thrashed in the water. A red and white...what? Coon? I stopped and stared, stuck in the mud like a dead tree stump. Moron.

Cameron wore a red ball cap and a white shirt, but he couldn't swim.

My scream propelled me into the water.

2

The cool morning turned into a day hot enough to pop the corn on the stalk. I couldn't tell if my clothes were still wet from saving Cameron's hide or from the buckets of sweat pouring out of me.

I looked back at my brother for the hundredth time. Made me want to poke him on the nose again. Acted like Mr. Cool and nothing had happened. Said he saved Jake from drowning. Said the coon was perched on his head, hanging onto his ears and riding him like a horse. Bunch of boloney. I knew better. He might have helped Jake, but he about drowned himself and wouldn't admit it. He spit out green water, moss, and mud for five minutes. I didn't see one pop out, but he might have swallowed a frog too.

The thought of losing him wasn't something I could ponder without a knot forming in my throat.

Jake lay stretched out in the shade of a red oak. Bees buzzing around his face couldn't stir a twitch out of him. He had a nose for coons. That's how he lost his eye. One night, we chased a wily old bandit through the woods on the backside of the house and he ran into a tree or a bush. I didn't see exactly what happened, but I heard him yelp. He pawed at his face, but never shed a tear.

I cried for him.

The poor guy has been lopsided ever since. Turns to the right so he doesn't bump into things, walks with

his head tilted left, and lies on the bad eye, the left side, where it used to be, so he can see me.

He looked like he slept now, sprawled out in the cool shade, but I knew he watched. He saw everything. Jake was my angel. Not one of those angels who protected me with a sword or could carry me away on swift wings. I'd heard tell of that kind before. Jake was a watcher, a witness, and someday, he'll tell folks what happened to me and Cameron, tell them about our childhood.

Cameron said I'm dumb, but I don't care. Jake keeps an eye out for danger, like snakes and rats and the like. And he tells me when Dad's coming. Only an angel would know about our Dad's coming and goings and that's a fact.

Aphids and grasshoppers fled before the tractor. The bugs didn't like hot afternoons. They were napping. I'd like to have been, what, where, I don't know, napping in the grass with the bugs or laying in the shade with Jake.

Steering the old tractor around and around the field numbed my mind. Engine noise numbed my hearing. Vibration numbed my feet until they felt like they didn't belong to me.

A bump rocked the tractor and my heart bounced off the roof of my mouth. Before I could push in the clutch and hit the brakes, the three-point hitch on the back shook like a dog shedding water.

Sometimes I could have just kicked myself. I knew better. Daydreaming, floating off into my own world. Something bad happened every time. Probably clipped a rock and when I looked back, sure enough, there it lay, a white one the size of a cantaloupe. Done some damage somewhere sure as shooting. I raised the sickle

mower and examined it for broken teeth, but didn't see one missing.

When I hopped down with two adjustable wrenches, Jake raised his head and then let it fall back onto the grass like the effort was too much for him. He'd seen this before and knew his help wouldn't be needed.

Cameron gave me a look, something between a frown and a pained look, and crawled down from his tractor. "T, you hit a rock, didn't you? You need to watch what you're doing. Dad is going to show up. He always does when something breaks."

My brother took big steps through the deep grass. With every stride, his knobby knees poked through large holes in his jeans. Only his sunburned ears kept the tattered red ball cap from sliding down over his eyes. Looked like he dried out from the swim he took. His shirt flapped in the breeze.

It was a waste of time to argue, though Cameron didn't think so, and looking at him set his tongue to wagging again. "You can't sit up there on the seat with your head in the clouds. You ain't that high up. Got to look where you're going, not just put the tractor in gear and drive like a kid on an outing for a soda pop with a pretty girl."

"Cameron, you know who you sound like? If you'll shut up and help me, Dad won't know. And since you mentioned it—what would you know about outings of any kind? Or pretty girls for that matter? You don't even like girls. We can't even drive yet." I went to work removing the bolts.

"I can drive a tractor, and I don't have to shut up. I know plenty about girls and such too. Just never been for a soda pop with one. You're so smart...we could

walk to the soda shop.”

The bolts came loose easy. Wasn't like they were rusty, and it hadn't been long since I'd clipped a rock. I'd hit one the last time I cut hay. “You're the one who's arguing about nothing, stating the obvious. I know Dad might come. I know I hit a rock. Pretty girls don't have nothing to do with sitting on a tractor. Quit bumping your gums and pull out the blade. I'll have it fixed in a jiffy.”

“I don't bump my gums when I talk. I got teeth.” He bared and snapped them together as proof.

“Cameron, please, bend over and pull, so I can watch *these* teeth. Be quiet.”

“OK, watch your fingers.”

“I'm watching. Get on with it.”

Cameron eased the blade of jagged cutters from the guards.

“Stop! There it is.” I pointed with the wrench. “The sagging one. Only need to tighten the rivets. Get the rock I hit, right there behind you. I'll use it for backing and beat the rivets with a wrench.”

It might have been silly, but I felt good using the same rock that started all the fuss in the first place for a solid base to flatten the rivets, tightening the cutter. It gave me a chance to hit something. Maybe I was more like Cameron than I thought.

Jake abandoned the shade tree with his head high, nose into the hot breeze. A long howl emerged from somewhere down deep in him. As he let it go, he looked like he hung on to the ground with his toenails to keep from flying off into the woods. The lunch whistle at the old sawmill didn't have nothing on Jake.

Something icy moved up my spine, like a warm breeze cooling sweat. My heart jumped back in my

throat, stopping up the hole, making it hard to breathe.

Dad's blue Ford pickup appeared seconds later, trailed by a cloud of red dust. A string of tin cans behind newlyweds leaving the white church down the road from the house sounded about the same. Bumps and such didn't slow Dad none.

Jake disappeared into the brush. The engine revved. Dad must have seen we were stopped.

Cameron gave me a stinging slap on the back and whined, "I told you. You never listen. He always comes. Now we can't have a drink and it's your fault."

I put the wrenches in my hip pocket and poked him in the shoulder with my fist. "You don't know we can't have a drink. Besides, I thought you got enough pond water this morning."

"Well, I didn't. And that's different."

"What's different about it?"

"You're trying to change the subject. You watch. Dad is going to beat the fire out of you for hitting the rock, and we're not going to wet a whistle, neither of us."

"You can't whistle anyways. Just get on your tractor and rake hay." I pointed across the pasture. "I'll take the licking."

Cameron's cheeks filled with air. Relief. I'd seen it before. He'd made up his mind. Ten long paces and one jump took him to the seat of the faded green tractor and out of Dad's reach. He didn't crank up and leave, though. He had to see what was going to happen.

Dad turned off the dirt road into the hay pasture without checking his speed. His lips moved. He chewed tobacco, but this didn't have anything to do with chewing.

Something came over me as I watched his chubby cheeks jiggle with every bump. I knew, sure as the sun rises, something was going to happen.

He drove up and stopped. The pickup door opened with the squeak and pop of worn hinges. Dad lumbered out, stretched to just above the doorframe and stuck out his chest, working his tan shirt in around the waist of his jeans. Relaxed, his belly sagged over his belt. He duck-waddled but with his feet splayed out. More penguin in the walk than duck. "I can't leave you boys no time. Just tear things up on purpose, both of you."

I gritted my teeth. No time like the present. "Dad, it's my fault. I clipped a rock. Only loosened a tooth. We already fixed it. I know deep grass is no excuse and I got to pay attention."

Dad's stare bored holes into the part of my soul that would give me up as a liar, pretending to be sorry. If our eyes met, he'd know right off, so I stared at his scuffed boots.

"Dad, can I have a drink?" Cameron broke the silence.

For whatever reason, Dad had a burr in his shorts about letting us drink water.

Cameron wasn't thinking. I told him I'd take the whooping, and I meant it. Dad had been focused on me, but not anymore. Cameron just had to ask.

Dad's face crinkled into something that would make a bear glad he sat on a tractor out of reach. "Do you know where you can get a drink? Go get you one if you do, but don't look in the back of my pickup. That water can is mine!" Tobacco spit dribbled down his chin. A drop or two made it to his shirt. The rest he smeared across the back of his hand.

Cameron cranked up his tractor, put it in gear, and let out the clutch. The rotary-rake attached to the three-point spun, throwing fresh-cut grass into a tall row as he sped by.

Dad grabbed me by the shirt and pulled me to him. The odor of tobacco reached down the back of my throat and threatened to gag me. "Boy, you tend to your business. Get this here mower back together and get to work. I want this field finished by nightfall. Tomorrow, me and you got to run a trotline in the slough. The missus wants some catfish." He pushed me away, to an arm's length, like he held the newspaper so he could see the letters, and then he turned loose.

"Maybe you ought to take Cameron. He likes to fish."

Shucks. I was ready for him to strike, but he still got me with the back of his hand. I don't know why I opened my mouth. I'd almost made it.

Dad pointed a stubby finger in my face. "Don't you try to stare me down, boy. You better find something to look at 'sides me."

My stare moved from the beads of sweat on his pockmarked nose down to a white button on his shirt, next to a slimy smearing of tobacco spit.

He walked to his pickup, put one foot on the doorjamb, then stopped. "That slap was for breaking the mower and costing me time. Your mouth just reminded me I owed you."

3

How in the world does the sun get so high so quick and then take forever to fall? Momma Ray said a watched pot never boils. Well, a watched sun never sets either.

Plenty of time to ponder the sun's movements for the latter half of its journey, driving my tractor in a smaller and smaller circle, working my way toward the middle of the field and the last narrow swath of standing grass. Had time to mull over Dad too. He reminded me of an old cow we used to have. She was tame as a pet coon one minute, and then, without warning, her cheese would slip off her cracker, and you'd be climbing the closest thing you could find to save your bacon from being trampled. I never ran from Dad, but I wanted to. Who knows what he'd do if I did.

Evening finally came. Deer ventured out—does with fawns at their sides, bucks with nubs of antlers that looked like another pair of ears. One sure-enough dandy buck strutted his stuff across one end of the hayfield. His rack of antlers towered over him, tall and thick, like he'd put his head in a bush and came out with branches stuck to it.

The sun and I finished our work about the same time. I kicked the mower out of gear, drove to the edge of the field, near the road where Dad would pick us up, and parked next to the baler. Cameron finished raking a few minutes later and followed me.

Jake walked to me, his tail wagging him. He put his head under my hand, so I could scratch him, and then moved to make sure I got his back.

I sat down with my back to a tractor tire. Stretching my legs out felt wonderful.

Cameron shut off his tractor, jumped down and walked over. "Dad's late."

"He won't be long," I said. "Wants to make sure we're finished. Might be parked in the woods watching us. You know how he is."

"Don't remind me."

Dad didn't leave us in the field after dark most times. Both tractors had lights, but we had chores to take care of. Chickens needed to be fed, hogs slopped, the garden tended, and dinner dishes washed.

Thoughts of my first wish poked me in the belly with a sharp pang of guilt. After I found out from my friend, Cindy, I could wish on a star, but only if it was the first star in the sky, I wished on a wish. I saw it the next night, put all I had into it, fingers crossed, hoped to die, all the things, and wished Dad would have a wreck. It's not right, I know, but I couldn't help it.

I never considered what we'd do if he crashed his old, blue rust-bucket. Me, Jake, and Cameron could survive without him, that's for sure. Jake could run down rabbits, and coons were right tasty. Some creeks had fish. Nuts and berries could be picked. Hundreds of old barns and houses sat empty in the woods. We could hide out. No one would know. We'd live off the land like folks did in the olden days, before fast food was invented.

My tongue had been dry as a dead rabbit on a dusty road, but now my mouth started to water. I couldn't help that either. Me and Cameron had only

been to The Burger Stop once, and Burger Monster...I could only imagine what monster burgers *they* made. People walked into that place fast, like they knew what was cooking. When they left, they barely moved, holding their stomachs, like they were weighted down with food.

Must be nice to eat until you can't stuff down another bite. My belly turned over at the thought.

Cameron sat next to me. Jake plopped down and put his chin on my lap. I stroked his head.

"Cameron, what do you want to be when you grow up?"

"A ninth grader."

"What? Come on. I'm serious."

He laughed. "What's there to be?"

"I don't know. You could be a fireman or a policeman or a farmer."

"Well, I'm not going to be a farmer. I promise you that. I might be a cook so I can eat when I want to. I don't think about such things. All I know is being a kid is killing me, spending our summer vacation from school in the hayfield and slopping hogs. Why would I be a farmer?"

"We don't think alike, do we?"

"Why would we?"

"We're twins."

"Well, maybe if we were identical we would."

Never thought of that one. "I wonder who's the oldest."

"T, we're twins."

"Yeah, but one of us is older. Can't be born at the same time. Just like a hog or a dog."

Cameron picked a blade of grass and held it in his lips like a toothpick. "Does it matter?"

"No, it doesn't."

"I wish you'd stay on a subject longer."

There were too many stars in the sky to be wishing on one. A big one twinkling on the horizon would have been good, but it was never the first to appear. "Do you think there's a God? Look at all them stars. I feel so small, like, like I'm just nothing. Don't you?"

"You are small. So am I."

Cameron always stated the obvious. I didn't know if I wanted an answer, not really. My heart told me God existed. If Jake was an angel, then God was out there somewhere. Didn't angels work for God? "He's supposed to be everywhere at once. Might be sitting right here by us."

Cameron glanced around, as if he might catch God standing on the other side of a tractor tire, listening in on our conversation. "T, you sure got a lot of questions floating around in your head. I don't know about God. Hard to see how He could be everywhere. He sure ain't looked in on us much, not that I can tell." Cameron pulled one blade of grass at a time and made a pile on his pants. "All I know is I'm hungry, thirsty and tired. I've been on that tractor so long I'm still vibrating. Probably be another hour 'fore I'll be able to feel my feet they're so numb."

Now that the tractors were silent the bugs chirped and sang. As dusk's red and yellow shades faded to gray, then to black, the skeeters woke up, their buzz irritating as the no-see-ems tormenting folks during the heat of the day. No-see-ems are always behind you, even when you look back, quick like, they stay behind you, buzzing, driving you crazy. No one's ever seen 'em.

Cameron put a hand on Jake's head and stroked it.