

# THE DEFENSELESS

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# **The Defenseless**

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**Amos Keppler**



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From the foreword to Eric Carr's novel, «The Defenseless» (excerpt):

I sit here looking at two photos, one old and one a bit less old, on the surface two ordinary photographs of groups of ordinary people... and they're giving me the willies.

Why? You ask.

Let me put it this way: Are you willing to believe the unbelievable, the utter and absolute horror, the wildest joy?

You do that to an extent anyway. You believe we will all be saved or condemned by entities beyond human ken. You pretend life is basically fair...

You deny the shadows because they don't fit into your perception of what life is about.

The world is never as you see it. It's safe to say it's never as anyone sees it... because one single human being will never see more than a tiny bit of the whole picture.

Perhaps every human alive, every being alive in the entire universe together can't grasp it all, can't grasp more than a tiny fraction of Infinity.

What is really going on in any given situation? Do we know? Can we know? Will what we thought we knew be completely and totally turned around many years later, when more facts are known? And is even that sufficient to even see a glimmer of what goes as truth? The only truth is, as I've learned only too well that there is no truth. Everything depends on viewpoint. Do we find a kind of approximate to it all by standing back, attempting to look at the big picture? Perhaps. But in my opinion there is always something to be said for being in the middle of it all, in the thick of the experience. If one of our main purposes is to learn, experience is surely the key to it, to gain insight, independence, gain Life. And if pain is a necessary part of it, Ted Warren and the others must have truly gained profound insight.

I would have wanted to speak to Mike. He's an essential, missing part of the puzzle. There is more, but he's surely one of the most important. Did something change him in his early teens? Did someone... or something reach out to transform him, or was what happened inevitable, a kind of fate?

I know more about this than anyone resembling an outsider, I think, perhaps even more than many directly involved. And I still have many more questions than answers. Life is a puzzle, a riddle, a *mystery*. We're all walking The Invisible Labyrinth, stumbling in its many pitfalls.

And it's one hell of a run.



## Part one: Day and Night - The Two Rivers





## Chapter One

The rivers ran from south to north, Cherry, the calm one originated on the prairie. South Platte ran from the mountains, wild and terrifying. And when they met, and South Platte continued alone on its further way north, who could say what was hiding below its surface?

The water waited for them, dark and foreboding.

The brothers went fishing. The brothers and the sister went on fishing trips often during summer, but not today.

There were flashes of images going through his mind, not going through his mind, but touching it from somewhere else, like a movie of a person carrying a camera as he or she walked forward, as she or he walked backwards. They froze him. They made him cringe and crouch standing up. He couldn't escape it. Closing his eyes made it worse. Opening his eyes made it worse. There were pain and blood and haze in a gray, ever-changing landscape. There was nothing to hold onto, except the pain, the blood, the haze, the cracks of thunder on a sunny day.

They all went fishing and never returned.

The annual local shooting contest had begun in this southern suburb of the city of Denver, Colorado, USA.

The loud cracks from guns sounded in the morning. They sounded throughout the day and early evening. Until the sun rested just above the mountains and darkness wasn't far away. Loud cracks in the fresh, warm morning air. Singing, vibrating shots in the hot summer day. By the end of the day hardly more than muted, insignificant sounds, even through the ears of the many onlookers.

These were social events. It always drew a crowd, but today it had drawn a doozy. Something had brought all the people here. Something.

The contenders wore mufflers over the ears, to protect their hearing from the many loud and otherwise deafening shots. They stood in a horizontal line, lay in line, stood on their knees in line by each other's side. The shots were fired at an uneven speed. Some finished before the others. They used rifles. On bull's eyes, on moving targets, while staying or lying still, or moving through the terrain of the contest.

The spectators applauded for each new result being called. The shooting contests were a tradition of more than a hundred years in these parts and both Denver locals and visiting travelers loyally supported the competition.

The gunsmoke made Ted Cousin's nose itch. They used what was supposedly smoke-free powder these days without it helping any. The

massive amount released from these events made such an effort useless. It stuck in his clothes, its taste in his mouth, in the very air long after he had left the arena, until it finally mixed with other, less identifiable smells.

He was young, just about thirteen, tall, pale and lean. His eyes occasionally flashed in red, seemingly a darker reflection of the sun above the mountain. Those who studied the boy closer couldn't say for sure what was correct. His eyes, or rather the skin around his eyes seemed swollen, in a way, too. He seemed angry, he seemed vulnerable. They couldn't read him at all and they worried. He saw their insecurity and he smelled it. They clearly felt uncomfortable in his presence. He had always had a keen sense of smell.

Iris Carson, a skinny, undeveloped teenager approached him eagerly.

– So what you're saying is that the powder from the guns is making your nose twitch, huh? I can't smell a thing, you know.

– I can smell it all, he told her, looking, not looking at the sun.

– My nose is probably fucked up by civilization, Iris joked sheepishly. – That's not fair.

That made him look closer at her, but only for a second or two.

He smelled them all. The scent of their fear assaulted his senses.

Everybody rushed to the cafeteria inside the clubhouse, filling it quickly. Ted didn't really know what he was feeling, sitting tense in the chair, surrounded by friends and family. He was a bundle of nerves. He always was, and it sickened him. But by thoughtfully pondering his situation, something he also did quite often, more complicated emotions surfaced.

The winners were called to the stage one by one. He was called last both the first and third time. Now everybody knew and the raging emotions within intensified further. He stood and raised his hands above the head. The smile felt strange on his lips. He had won his class and also the entire competition, no matter the competition category. He had won.

On the stage, where someone had left a derelict, old piano he received a number of prizes. He received them from Jeff McCabe, the Denver police Chief. This in addition to the cup he had been given outside. Even photographers from the major Denver newspapers were here to honor him. Ted descended from the stage and was congratulated by his brother Michael and then Michael's girlfriend Tilla. She kissed him lightly on the cheek. So did the brothers' sister Linda, though considerably more cautious. Erasmus Coogan, his uncle gave him a hearty handshake. His parents embraced him.

– Not the best in the world, his father grinned, – but quite fun anyway, right?

– Great fun, Ted confirmed. He waved eagerly to everybody who cheered and applauded.

– So, how do you feel about this, Mr. Cousin? A journalist called out to the group. – About your boys. Your older son is actually the runner up.

Rodney Cousin straightened and bristled.

– I’m quite proud, of course, but not really surprised. We have always encouraged the competitive element in our family. Mike has been the best until now. That’s natural since he’s older, but this is a reminder for him to improve himself further.

– You’re just the perfect American family, aren’t you? Another journalist called without the slightest hint of irony.

– We like to think so, yes, Cousin smiled. – In these troubled times I feel it is even more paramount for someone to stick to the old well-proven ways.

Ted pulled back a bit, just a step or two, hardly visible, without looking at his father. He knew how it must look, this family gathering. Such harmony, such envy. As the day melted into the eternal night every face stood out to him. The stiff, falsely happy faces. He saw them from behind, saw from behind their true color and himself mirrored in the big display windows by the parking lot. The image of the parking lot faded with the last few remnants of day, when the shining electrical, artificial lights ascended.

– They don’t cheer for me or for the event, he told Linda vehemently later. – They cheer for themselves. To keep their own wretched lives from going completely to the dogs they attempt to live through me, through anybody else giving them a quick fix, to give meaning to their lives.

Linda didn’t say anything. She hardly did. Did he see a small tear in the corner of her eyes? He could never tell.

He became resigned once more, allowing what would happen anyway to happen.

There occurred a lot of pretence in his life. No, too kind. He pretended a lot, that he wasn’t who he was and he wasn’t where he was. He pretended a lot, at least to others. The true difficulty lay in lying to himself, but he had gotten quite good in that, too. He dreamed a lot, about the future. Usually stupid daydreams about the ridiculous and unreachable.

But also more.

He walked the road to the house through the forest. Suddenly... something happened, like a fist in the stomach, a sledgehammer in the head, but worse. He knew about physical pain and this was nothing like it. This was similar to an assault, but it came from within, he was certain of that much. He saw himself as older, sometimes much older. An image full

of contrasts, but little content, black and white, gray, the dark. A flash of continuing hopelessness. He ran. Not through this forest. Not this forest, but another far away. Someone ran at his side, but he could never discern whom. He saw nothing but a shadow. Bright summer nights, it did him no good, helped less than nothing. Wherever he ran darkness gathered.

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The last day at school. A much desired holiday waited with a slap in the face. The teacher, Erazmus Coogan studied, with a smile on his face the long line of pupils approaching him in a more or less orderly fashion, to shake his hand. He was old school, he bothered with such things. The children thought he was corny, of course, but a few returned his smile. At least he thought so. Old «blue eyes» Coogan belonged to the select few of the attending teachers at the school the students could stomach at all. He had a reputation as «okay», but something of a dork.

– Finished this semester, boys and girls, he chided them, admonished them. – Welcome back in the fall.

He shook hands with each of the children coming forward, those among them degrading themselves to such an act. Today's youth saw elementary polite behavior as a non-priority. Now, towards the end of the sixties traditional generational divisions had been increased to formerly unknown heights. Contempt - and even hatred - never strayed long from the surface.

The youths yearned to leave the school premises as soon as possible. That was undoubtedly one reason why so many were «forthcoming».

– I would like to give you greetings from my parents and this little gift, sir, Frank Forester greeted him and presented the gift in a somewhat eloquent move.

The gift itself had been very «tastefully» wrapped in expensive paper and ornaments. Thomas and Regina Forester did everything in «style». Or their servants did.

– Say thank you to your parents from me, Coogan said very politely.

He actually saw an even greater hatred in the eyes of the, well... well fed boy, something that rarely or never reached the surface. It didn't surprise him. He saw the boy as a born hypocrite, a trait not exactly discouraged through the first thirteen years of his life.

Some more young meat bothered the teacher before he virtually forgot Frank... and everything else. He pulled himself together with an act of will and directed his attention at the long, fiery red hair. Gray eyes stared coldly at him. Coogan noticed that he didn't quite manage to keep his composure. Tilla Stevens had always that effect on him. He was made to feel old by the patronizing look in her eyes. This time he even got a hard-

on by her stance and the lack of clothes covering her luscious body and it made him depressed.

– We must improve your grades in the fall, he said and cursed the hoarse voice. – They weren't as good as they could have been this year.

– I don't give a fuck, she snarled. – There's no way I could be the slightest interested in what marks you put in that fucking book.

She always managed to get to him. He was unable to fathom why... or why she behaved the way she did. Her abilities and intelligence undoubtedly far exceeded any common average. So how could she let it all go to waste like that?

The charade ended by her pulling the report book out of his hand and heading out of there with her head held high. Distraught he kept shaking his head, kept wondering what made her behave in such a manner. It wasn't her parents. He had met them. They were nice, well adapted people. She always made him doubt himself, that little bitch.

– So, shall we continue, teacher? Iris Carson looked innocently, teasingly up at him.

For a moment he looked sharply at her, too, before managing to pull himself together. Iris had something of the same impudence and lack of respect in her make up as Tilla, but contrary to Miss Stevens she was just an underdeveloped, scrawny kid, not even close to being that distracting.

He gave her the book. She took it and stumbled disappointed out of the classroom. The boys looked at him with reluctant respect. The teacher was a cool customer.

One by one they paraded by him. The line thinned. Finally, at the back of the queue only two remained. When looking closer at the two, the brother and sister he felt the usual flash of irritation, of worry.

– Now, Ted and Linda, he greeted them in a friendly, jovial manner. – What can I do for you? Is anything wrong?

They didn't reply, not vocally anyway. After receiving their report card they just stood there in silence, staring blindly ahead. But not at him. It seemed safe to say that they hardly saw him at all, that they, in truth didn't realize they were there with him, in the same room as him.

– You shouldn't look this glum, he said jokingly. – Your grades weren't that bad, you know.

– Grades? Ted looked directly at him and Coogan started sweating instantly.

It was a hot day, but not that hot, and suddenly it felt very cold.

– Grades are important, he said defensively. – For your future and well being as productive adults of the community. But yours are definitely above average and I'm confident that you'll improve further during fall.

Linda forced a pale smile, one looking more like a scowl. The boy didn't change his expression one way or another.

– So? You want to tell your favorite uncle what's wrong?

He was actually their only uncle, or their only uncle locally. Another one, by the name of Eugene Kendall, Coogan's half brother lived farther south in the state, but they had little contact with him.

– Nothing, they said in unison and shook their head, so synchronized one would be tempted to think they were identical twins.

He didn't believe them for a minute. Something was happening, for sure, something he wasn't privy to. Once more he was overwhelmed by an unexplainable worry. Ted worried him. The dark look from the dark-haired boy burned accusingly at everyone and everything. The brown eyes almost looked black in the pale-skinned face. Coogan froze like he had never frozen before, a negative experience in every way that counted. If he never had experienced one before, he did so, now.

And he would know, after one year in Vietnam, only one year, an eternity, until being honorably discharged after being wounded twice, counting himself lucky. He had inevitably changed in that horrible place. And he had seen others change, inexplicable in that damp, remote jungle, a wilderness fit for no man. But... only in minor ways compared to these two. Before he left they had been normal, lively kids. Now, they stood as transformed before him. He had seen fear in others' eyes during the war. He saw it now, in the youths' eyes. Fear, despair and hatred and quite a lot more. Nuances he hardly felt capable of identifying. They were bullied and persecuted by other pupils, he knew that much, but not more than others, not excessively so, nothing to explain the insane uncomfortable sense of dread he experienced in their company.

The conversation slowly ground to a halt, unnoticeable at first, then obviously. He was unable to decide whether or not he or they was the cause. And that also bothered him.

– Everything okay at home?

– Everything, Linda confirmed, nodding eagerly.

– Everything. Ted echoed.

And Ezra imagined he could hear a true echo somewhere, in the hallway perhaps, but he couldn't be sure. The hallway had never been prone to echoes, he knew that much.

– I'll accompany you outside, he said friendly enough.

He didn't bother to lock the door. The custodian would take care of that, or not, later. They walked first with fast, nervous steps. He managed to keep up with them in a fairly relaxed manner.

No one spoke during the walk inside the dark hallway. The western wing, where a huge window usually lit walls, floor and ceiling had been sealed temporarily due to ongoing restoration work. Very little sunlight emerged from the convoluted web of dark tarp and added construction material.

Whoever had dreamed up the new set up, should be shot on sight, he thought grimly.

The only real daylight emerged through the double front door, opening and closing as the pupils rushed outside. Ted's skin seemed only worse in here. He walked with bowed head and bowed back, so bowed that he seemed smaller than his sister, crouched, as if in pain, like a humpback. He had been quite well-built for his age. Now, he seemed abnormally thin and pale. The constantly fresh colored skin had paled to muddy water. Something had happened. What?

Coogan shook hands with them by the exit. When he looked encouragingly at Linda he saw her mouth twitch at least once. She wanted to tell him something. The blue eyes gave her away.

She seemed transparent to him. Compared to her brother she still looked quite okay, but she had turned into a fearful and brooding girl. He saw it, even if no one else did.

He... smelled something... huge and bad, the stench of it so strong that it actually literally made his nose twitch. He felt an abyss of understanding open up below him, so wide that he could hardly see its walls on either side. But present, like a sore thumb. It made his mood deteriorate even further.

Howard Grey, the biology teacher rushed towards them and ruined any change of engaging in a confidential conversation. Ezra experienced a nauseous mix of relief and self-contempt. He hardly noticed the brother and sister slipping through the door.

– We need to talk, Grey stated in his usual pretentious, unbearable manner. – In confidential circumstances.

Linda held the boy's hand and dragged him away. She seemed far stronger than him. Coogan kept them in his sight until the end of the school's plaza. They met Mike by the gate. The older brother met them there almost every day. It had caused a few remarks at first, but now it only seemed natural. Linda and Ted obviously needed his support. And no one doubted his ability to give it. Michael looked like a bigger and far healthier version of his kid brother. He wasn't more than sixteen, but his frame and strength far exceeded the average of his age. Coogan knew they were of about the same height, approximately six feet two, but Ted's... *folded* frame made him look smaller. The muscles filled the older

brother's clothes. His pride and confidence practically made him glow. Coogan wondered what had happened to Ted and not to him.

– Is there any rush? He asked Grey, not bothering to hide his indifference.

– There is indeed, Grey stated very, very correctly. – The correction of sloppy work can't wait until later and your two prodigies have in truth been even sloppier than I could have imagined possible this time around.

Coogan wanted to ask him if he could ever imagine anything, but held his tongue. An unquestionable and familiar feeling of dread rose instantly in him. He realized he knew and feared where this was heading.

– So you mean...

– The confirmation just arrived, Grey told him, clearly gloating.

But he would have gloated even more, if he had realized what he, in truth was sitting on. But Coogan had no intention of telling him that.

– Show me, he demanded.

– Oh, I will, the other man said. – Rest assured of that...

They walked straight to Grey's office. Several colleagues attempted to initiate a conversation, but for once the two of them were completely in agreement. Coogan found himself unable to hide his eagerness, how upset he truly was. He had been very eager and also reluctant to get the confirmation Grey spoke about. He had been interested, against his own best judgment. And now his curiosity led him helplessly down the road he absolutely didn't want to go.

Grey locked the door behind them and then went straight for his briefcase. Coogan recognized the papers he pulled up and handed over. He did so immediately. The vast abyss opened up further below him as he read, as Grey added his own sarcastic spoken words.

When Ezra Coogan sometime later emerged from the office, he was deeply, visibly shaken. It was a man on the brink people saw leave the teachers' recreation room.

– Then you will talk to them? Grey called after him.

– Yes, he replied absentminded. – I'll talk to them.

He had a faint recollection of having physically assaulted Grey in there, but couldn't verify whether or not it had actually happened, other than in fevered flashes of imagination.

The dean approached him, accompanying him out in the hall.

– A good year, Ezra?

Ezra felt a sense of profound irritation. Only his friends got to call him Ezra.

– In terms of work and grades among the students...

The dean looked encouragingly at him.



– ... we have had an excellent year.

The dean nodded, content in his world.

– But I can't for the life of me convince myself it was worth it.

The dean stopped and let him go on his way.

He walked through the schoolyard, left the school, left his car behind on the parking lot and started walking home. He kept shaking his head. A part of him had always wondered, wondered what was wrong, but this opened up even more than he would have ever expected. Because this couldn't be it. This couldn't be everything. He had convinced himself of that, now. Nothing made sense anymore. Things had made sense once. He dimly recalled that time with a certain fondness, a shaking of the head. A bench appeared in his vision somewhere ahead. He sat down on it.

As the wind blew, as he saw it move the treetops.

Across the street two small boys were playing. The mother stood there watching. There was rough horseplay, but no malice.

Ted fell apart, inch by inch. But he didn't know what Ezra had just learned. If he had known it would have been easily discernible. The grades weren't the worst. They were clearly above average. But that, too, was a kind of duty, a distraction. He was certainly intelligent enough, but didn't use it. He had a lot of physical potential, but failed to reach for it. Something was missing, something relevant. He didn't belong here, an outsider of outsiders. Coogan's distinct impression was that the boy quite simply was dying on the vine; that he turned to dust in front of everybody.

His self respect had at some crazy turn, vanished utterly.

Something terrifying was happening before everyone's eyes and no one saw anything. They saw the reality of it, of course, Ted's obvious illness, his fall from grace. But they didn't have a clue why. And in spite of the fact that he knew more, far more than the others, neither did Coogan. The more he knew, the more convoluted and distressing the web revealed itself to be. At every turn he got sucked further into the invisible labyrinth.

Nothing made sense.

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South Platte River passed majestically the old, white house, where the boiling, enraged water made a turn. Boiling water, boiling sky, making the Earth shake. An old, tall oak grew right by the dark river. On one of its thick branches, a human length or so above the unruly waves an overly lean frame sat rocking. Skin was pale and made the long dark brown hair completely dominate the face. As if dreaming the brown eyes stared across the river and at the tall mountains rising outside the city. The

branch he sat on was rocking slightly. The rhythm poured pleasantly through his body.

Ted Cousin enjoyed sitting here, like this, momentarily distracted from his dark thoughts. With his eyes closed he could dream about other times, other places. His thoughts felt light, as if not being weighed down anymore. It was surprisingly easy, like his spirit truly took flight from the body and moved across mountains, forests and seas. Eagle flew out of the night and into... into the valley of kings.

And as ever panic set in almost instantly. He felt... a presence and he had to open his eyes. Wide-eyed he stared down, into the water, the dark and deep pool. He saw a naked face dominated by the eyes reflecting the low, setting sun. But it was only one face, one pair of mirrors. The relief he felt made the hatred and self-contempt rise to a bile inside.

The thirteen-year old boy rolled his hands into fists, into knots. Every time he looked at himself critically, like an outsider in his own body he felt ever more pathetic and helpless. He dug out his wallet, opening, looking at a photo there. It had been taken one year earlier, only one year ago, of him, Linda... and Mike. While looking at the photo of Ted Cousin, the twelve-year old, there were few or no remaining similarities. He feared he was sinking deeper and deeper into an abyss there was no way out of.

And his weary, adult thoughts kept haunting him.

Through the thick set of leaves he looked at the house. The parents relaxed in the garden with Linda and Mike. They sat in their chairs close to the house' southern wall and it was about 30 steps away. Ted had counted them once. In spite of the distance he still easily heard the thunderous laughter, thick with contempt and malice. Mike laughed because of something the father said.

– Let's leave Ted to himself for a while, dad, he said, shaking his head. – For unfathomable reasons he has decided to go through a... phase right now. It will pass, it always does.

The parents didn't notice the scorn in Mike's voice, but the twins easily heard it, sensing it cutting into them, their flesh and thoughts. The girl lowered her eyes, to keep them from betraying her. Ted dug his fingers into the bark, feeling the sickening rage coming on.

He slowly, carefully broke off a thinner branch and threw it into the river. The movement, slight as it was, made him lose his footing. Not until the very last moment did he manage to grab hold of the nearest branch above. Breathing heavily he pulled himself to safety. Sweat flowed from skin seemingly even more pale then seconds earlier.

Where he stood, breathing and sweating hard and with muscles virtually screaming in pain he had very little in common with the healthy, sturdy boy celebrating his twelfth birthday the previous year. The shoulder blades showed, even through the clothes, grotesquely free of flesh. The arms were so thin that he could reach around the upper arm with one hand. Under the worn shirt one could see the ribs. He stood with his back to the tree, but didn't use it for support. Instead he made certain that his back didn't touch any part of the tree.

The Dark traveled with the cloud traveling with the sun across the sky, covering its light, and with him as well. As he moved, it moved. He studied his hand in the sunlight, as he moved it and saw The Shadow. He hit the tree with the hand and cried out sharply as the brutal contact with the wood hurt his skin.

He looked up again, finally, after what seemed like forever. Only Linda remained by the big camping table, lithe and lean, beautiful as a mirage. Her eyes were as blue as the clear sky. Still, it was something somber about her, clearly noticeable by a second, closer inspection, nothing physical, but below the surface, festering like a disease.

She rose and walked towards the river, to him. No one else would have noticed the slight hesitation, but he did. He knew her so well.

She wasn't really that deep. He sensed none of the abysmal depths in her that he sensed in himself. Ironically she could be said to be the mirror image of Mike, what Ted wasn't.

Her closeness, the bright smile for a moment washing away his cynicism, his dark thoughts.

Both cast a look back at the house. They saw no one there, but their happiness, their pubescent joy over being alone, over being alone together faded to gray.

She stopped just below the thick branch, resting her back against the tree.

– Do you remember the last time we went to the library? He said brusquely, before she got to initiate the conversation.

– Sure. She shrugged. – Why do you ask?

– Mike actually told us to go to the library to wait for him, Ted persisted.

– It was nice of him, she said automatically. – He knows how much we enjoy it in there.

– We looked through the damn newspapers, he continued unabated. – We were looking at the world, at everything happening out there.

– Yes, she said brightly. – People are claiming their freedom everywhere.

Behind the smile, the exuberant mood....

He had seen the fear in her eyes.

– Why did you come? He said, attempting to keep a light tone, but unable to not expose the bitterness in his voice.

– Don't you want to talk to m-me? She stuttered unhappily.

When he saw her like this, naked and exposed, the hatred and the fear within grew even stronger.

The hatred, the fear, the self-contempt. Sometimes he got everything mixed up, to the point where it all turned indistinguishable, the common denominator flashing before his eyes, like fire, like sweet pain.

She held hard, almost convulsive in his leg, clutched it to the point where her nails almost broke his skin. An indefinite sense of power rose in him. She needed him, as much as he needed her.

– So much has changed, he said softly, – but I'll always talk to you. That will never change.

She smiled then, but behind the smile he saw the all too familiar shame. He stiffened. She pulled down her skirt. Suddenly it was as if she couldn't stand meeting his eyes anymore and she looked down.

– Mike sent me to fetch you, she said unhappily, and reached for his hand.

Her words hit him hard. He realized, as he should have done instantly that she had not come of her own volition. He pulled away like a wounded beast, but then he stopped, resigned, looking bitterly at her.

– Go ahead, he said, his voice rasping like metal. – I can't stop you. You're far stronger than me. Mike has fed you well.

She broke into tears and stared at him with a naked expression in her eyes.

– How can you say something like that? She cried. – How can you be so c-cruel? You're not the only one suffering.

Sobbing she fell to her knees and hid her face in shaking hands.

Filled with regret he jumped down from the tree, to her, not even noticing how easy, how effortlessly it happened. She was right. He had nothing to blame her for. She was stuck in the mire, just as much as him. They ate, slept and lived on sufferance and vicious mercy.

– Don't cry. He choked. – I've got no one else to turn to. If it wasn't for you I would have given in a long time ago.

He glanced towards the river. Her eyes widened in shock. He nodded to her unspoken question.

– It would have been so easy, wouldn't it, he said almost absentmindedly, – to surrender to the river, let go of all problems? The thought of you has helped me resist its pull, but something *else*, too, a resistance beyond... beyond anything I know.

– You’re so grown up, she sniffed, smiling. – And such a poet. I love you.

– It’s his fault, he said. – The devil up there is to blame for everything. We’re being hounded and spat on by our former friends *and it’s his fault*.

– Don’t say that, she protested. – He’s our brother.

The hurt and rage in his eyes almost went beyond anything she had experienced before.

– I didn’t mean it, she whispered. – I didn’t mean it like that. It’s what he wants me to say, what he’s teaching through every single harsh lesson.

Despair jolted her when she discovered that Ted straightened. He always did that when being excited. As if to keep him down, she dug her long nails into his back.

She backed off when he suddenly crouched, his face distorted in pain. He collapsed in a heap on the ground. She saw blood flow from his lower lip. He had bit himself.

– What’s *wrong*? She wondered. – What has he *done*?

Ted did his best to roll away, to avoid her closer scrutiny, but she carefully, determined grabbed his shirt and held on to it, comforting him. After a while she removed it, exposing the skin beneath.

Skin hidden under thin fabric.

The shock almost made her stumble into the river. She closed her eyes hard and hoped to awake after an afternoon nap on the twelfth birthday, to discover that it had all been a nightmare. But while reopening them she still saw her brother writhing in pain on the ground, *then* and *now* superimposed on her vision. She desperately wanted to turn away from the horrible sight, but couldn’t, couldn’t, couldn’t.

She realized now why he had walked around like some sort of humpback recently. The entire backside, from his butt to the neck had swollen to unbelievable proportions. She kept blinking, hard pressed to convince herself that he was still alive and not a walking dead.

– Oh, my God, she whispered. – The shooting contest.

Without looking at her he rose and dressed, teeth gritting. With eyes turned towards the house he started walking. It seemed to Linda that he hadn’t heard a word she had said, since his own, last outburst. Confused and frightened she ran after him.

– Cain and Abel were also supposed to be brothers, he mumbled.

The girl’s eyes grew round and huge. She feared he didn’t know she was there at all.