

THE RAINS

GREGG HURWITZ



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK • NEW YORK

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ENTRY 1

It was past midnight. I was still working in the barn when I heard the rolling door lurch open. I started and lost my grip on a block of hay. It tumbled off the baling hooks.

It was creepy out here with the wind whipping across the roof, fluttering loose shingles. Bits of hay strobed through the shafts of light from the dangling overheads, and the old beams groaned beneath the load of the loft. I was plenty tough, sure, but I was also a high-school sophomore and still got spooked more often than I'd want to admit.

I turned to the door, my fists clenched around the wooden handles of the baling hooks. Each hook is a wicked metal curve that protrudes about a foot from between the knuckles of my hand. The barn door, now open, looked out onto darkness. The wind lashed in, cutting through my jeans and flannel shirt, carrying a reek that overpowered the scent of hay. It smelled as if someone were cooking rotten flesh.

I clutched those baling hooks like a second-rate Wolverine, cleared my throat, and stepped toward the door, doing my best to deepen my voice. "Who's there?"

Patrick swung into sight, his pump-action shotgun pointed at the floor. "Chance," he said, "thank God you're okay."

My older brother's broad chest rose and fell, his black cowboy hat seated back on his head. He'd been running, or he was scared.

But Patrick didn't get scared.

"Of course I'm okay," I said. "What are you talking about?" I let the baling hooks drop so they dangled around my wrists from the nylon loops on the handles. Covering my nose with a sleeve, I stepped outside. "What's that *smell*?"

The wind was blowing west from McCafferty's place or maybe even the Franklins' beyond.

"I don't know," Patrick said. "But that's the least of it. Come with me. Now."

I turned to set down my gear on the pallet jack, but Patrick grabbed my shoulder.

"You might want to bring the hooks," he said.

ENTRY 2

I should probably introduce myself at this point. My name is Chance Rain, and I'm fifteen. Fifteen in Creek's Cause isn't like fifteen in a lot of other places. We work hard here and start young. I can till a field and deliver a calf and drive a truck. I can work a bulldozer, break a mustang, and if you put me behind a hunting rifle, odds are I'll bring home dinner.

I'm also really good at training dogs.

That's what my aunt and uncle put me in charge of when they saw I was neither as strong nor as tough as my older brother.

No one was.

In the place where you're from, Patrick would be the star quarterback or the homecoming king. Here we don't have homecoming, but we do have the Harvest King, which Patrick won by a landslide. And of course his girlfriend, Alexandra, won Harvest Queen.

Alex with her hair the color of wheat and her wide smile and eyes like sea glass.

Patrick is seventeen, so Alex is between us in age, though I'm on the wrong end of that seesaw. Besides, to look at Patrick you wouldn't think he was just two years older than me. Don't get me wrong—years of field work have built me up pretty good, but at six-two, Patrick stands half a head taller than me and has grown-man strength. He wanted to stop wrestling me years ago, because there was never any question about the outcome, but I still wanted to try now and then.

Sometimes trying's all you got.

It's hard to remember now before the Dusting, but things were normal here once. Our town of three thousand had dances and graduations and weddings and funerals. Every summer a fair swept through, the carnies taking over the baseball diamond with their twirly-whirly rides and rigged games. When someone's house got blown away in a tornado, people pitched in to help rebuild it. There were disputes and affairs, and every few years someone got shot hunting and had to get rushed to Stark Peak, the closest thing to a city around here, an hour and a half by car when the weather cooperated. We had a hospital in town, better than you'd think—we had to, what with the arms caught in threshers and ranch hands thrown from horses—but Stark Peak's where you'd head if you needed brain surgery or your face put back together. Two years ago the three Braaten brothers took their mean streaks and a juiced-up Camaro on a joyride, and only one crawled out of the wreckage alive. You can bet Ben Braaten and his broken skull got hauled to Stark Peak in a hurry.

Our tiny town was behind on a lot. The whole valley didn't get any cell-phone coverage. There was a rumor that AT&T was gonna come put in a tower, but what with our measly population they didn't seem in a big hurry. Our parents said that made it peaceful here. I thought that made it boring, especially when compared to all the stuff we saw on TV. The hardest part was knowing there was a whole, vast world out there, far from us. Some kids left and went off to New York or L.A. to pursue big dreams, and I was always a bit envious, but I shook their hands and wished them well and meant it.

Patrick and I didn't have the same choices as a lot of other kids.

When I was six and Patrick eight, our parents went to Stark Peak for their anniversary. From what we learned later, there

was steak and red wine and maybe a few martinis, too. On their way to the theater, Dad ran an intersection and his trusty Chrysler got T-boned by a muni bus.

At the funeral the caskets had to stay closed, and I could only imagine what Mom and Dad looked like beneath those shiny maple lids. When Stark Peak PD released their personals, I waited until late at night, snuck downstairs, and snooped through them. The face of Dad's beloved Timex was cracked. I ran my thumb across the picture on his driver's license. Mom's fancy black clutch purse reeked of lilac from her cracked-open perfume bottle. It was the smell of her, but too strong, sickly sweet, and it hit on memories buried in my chest, making them ring like the struck bars of a xylophone. When I opened the purse, a stream of pebbled windshield glass spilled out. Some of it was red.

Breathing the lilac air, I remember staring at those bloody bits scattered on the floorboards around my bare feet, all those pieces that could never be put back together. I blanked out after that, but I must have been crying, because the next thing I remember was Patrick appearing from nowhere, my face pressed to his arm when he hugged me, and his voice quiet in my ear: "I got it from here, little brother."

I always felt safe when Patrick was there. I never once saw him cry after my parents died. It was like he ran the math in his head, calm and steady as always, and decided that one of us had to hold it together for both of us, and since he was the big brother, that responsibility fell to him.

Sue-Anne and Jim, my aunt and uncle, took us in. They lived just four miles away, but it was the beginning of a new life. Even though I wanted time to stay frozen like it was on Dad's shattered Timex, it couldn't, and so Patrick and I and Jim and Sue-Anne started over.

They didn't have any kids, but they did the best they could.

They tried their hardest to figure out teacher conferences and the Tooth Fairy and buying the right kind of toys at Christmas. They weren't cut out to be parents but they did their damndest, and at the end of the day that's all that really matters. Patrick and I loved them for it, and they loved us right back.

That doesn't mean my brother and I didn't have to grow up in a hurry. There was plenty of work to be done around the ranch and more bellies to fill. Jim had a couple hundred heads of cattle, and he bred Rhodesian ridgebacks and shipped them off across the country as guard dogs at two thousand a pop. Sue-Anne made sure to have hot food on the table three times a day, and she read to us every night. I vanished into those stories—the *Odyssey*, *Huck Finn*, *The Arabian Nights*. As we got older, Patrick grew tired of it all, but I kept on, raiding the bookshelf, reading myself to sleep with a flashlight under the covers. I think I hid inside those fictional worlds because they kept me from thinking about how much I'd lost in the real one.

By his early teens, Patrick was clearly a force to be reckoned with. He and I didn't look much alike—strangers were usually surprised to find out we were brothers. Not that I was ugly or weak or anything, but Patrick . . . well, he was Patrick. He got my dad's wide shoulders and good looks, and he could ride herd and rope cattle alongside the best ranch hand, chewing a piece of straw and never breaking a sweat. The girls lost their mind over who got to wear his cowboy hat during lunchtime.

Until Alex. Then it was only her.

I didn't like math so much, but I loved English and science. I didn't have Patrick's skills as a cattleman, but I wasn't afraid of hard work. I was pretty good behind a hunting rifle, almost as good as Uncle Jim himself, but the one thing I was better at

than anyone was raising those puppies. Ridgebacks are lion hunters from Africa, the most fearless and loyal creatures you'll ever meet. Whenever we had a new litter, I'd play with the pups, training them up from day one. By the time they hit two months, they'd follow me anywhere, and by the time they were half a year old, I could put them on a sit-stay and they wouldn't move if you tried to drag them from their spot. It was hard fitting in all the work around school, but somehow I managed, and if there's one thing Dad taught me, it's that the Rains don't complain.

When it came time to stack the hay, Patrick always finished his part early and offered to help me on my share, but I made sure I finished it myself. Even if it was at the end of a long day. Even if it meant I had to stay up past midnight, working alone in the barn.

Which was what I was doing after the Dusting, the first time I'd seen Patrick nervous for as far back as my memory could stretch.

Considering everything that had been going on lately, I couldn't blame him.

But hang on. Let me start where it makes sense, one week ago. Not that *any* of it makes sense, but if I lay out some of what I learned later, maybe you'll be able to keep up.

I do need you to keep up.

Your life depends on it.