

ARTIST'S BRUSH

Dana Davis

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 and sat that way for several moments until her brother’s crying turned to sniffles.

The paintings she’d been working on beckoned so she stood and made her way to the hidden panel, 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. 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 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. This painting was nearly finished and she thought it one of her best. All it needed was a few touchups. She could almost hear the calming sound of the brook as it flooded across the stones, and she smiled. She closed her eyes and imagined herself sitting on the brook’s bank as the cool water made its way across her dangling feet.

Jake sniffed, pulling her back to reality. Tanya placed a hand on her brother’s head and stroked his sandy hair as her mother’s muffled cries drifted up the attic stairs. Fights between the adults rang through the thin walls of their old house, permeating every room. 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, giving her hope, but he always came back.

The man had 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 had tried to intervene, tried to fight back, but the man only 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 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."

A brilliant 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. Those 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?"

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

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

After a moment, she 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. She'd bought these brushes at a local thrift store. They were old and had nicks and paint stains but Tanya loved them.

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.

When her stomach began to rumble, Tanya leaned back and adjusted the barrette that threatened to slip out of her hair. *A little more and it'll be done.* The thought made her heart race with anticipation. And fear. What if it doesn't work? She immediately admonished herself for those doubts. *Just believe and it will happen.* A voice had told her that in her dream. *You have to want it and believe in it.*

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. "That's a scary place, Sissy."

"Yes."

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.

Jake tapped her arm and pointed toward the attic door. Fear etched his small features as 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 now. Will he? She scrubbed her hands on an old towel 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 it, wouldn't hide it, not this time.

"I know you're up there! Get down right now or I'll come up there and give you both a lickin' you won't ever forget!" His speech was slurred.

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

"Time's up, you filthy little shits!" The door flew open and an irate man stepped into the attic, bloodshot eyes fierce and fixed on Tanya. "Get over here right now! I'm gonna teach you a lesson for runnin' from me."

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 held her brother tight against her side.

"Don't tell me what to do, you little bitch." 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, pulled him free. 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 and almost slipped on an old towel that lay on the floor.

Tanya's heart raced and she panted from exertion. *You have to end this,* a little voice inside said. *Do it now. Just believe.*

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.

Jake, tears staining his cheeks and mouth open in shock, pushed his hand into hers. They crouched close to the painting. A small man stood beneath one of the barren trees, a belt dangling from one hand, tiny eyes darting back and forth in terror. The miniature mouth opened and closed but Tanya couldn't hear a thing. Then, just like in her dream, he faded from view, leaving only the bare trees and dark skies the way she'd painted them.

It worked. It really worked! She laughed, relief flooding her as she stood and turned to her brother. "He won't bother us ever again, Jake. I promise."

The boy gazed up at her with awe. Then his lips spread into a wide grin. "You're a *really* good painter, Sissy."

She chuckled. "Thanks. But let's keep this our secret, okay?" She led him out of the attic and down the stairs, confident he wouldn't say anything. Jake knew how to keep secrets. "Mama?" No one answered and Tanya's heart hammered against her ribs. "Mama, where are you?" Fear set her skin tingling as she led Jake into the family room. "Mama!"

"Out here," her mother called from the kitchen.

She's okay. Relief flooded Tanya and she let out a hard breath as Jake ran ahead.

Her mother looked up from a dining chair as Tanya entered the kitchen, one eye swollen and a bruise near her mouth. "Where is he?"

"He left."

The woman nodded, gave a relieved smile, and put a bag of frozen peas to her eye as Jake caressed her hair. She wouldn't ask more questions about her missing boyfriend. He'd run off before.

Tanya glanced at the calendar that hung on the fridge with two large magnets and she flipped the page up. A red mark encircled two of the days in the next month. The local craft fair. When she turned back, her mother was studying her.

"I think I'll make some more jam for the fair this year," the woman said. "You gonna sell paintings again?"

Tanya's best friend, Stacy, had an uncle who liked to touch her where he shouldn't. That man never missed the fair. Neither did Hank Junior, the boy who liked to torture cats. Just for the fun of it.

Tanya smiled. "Yes, Mama. I am." *Tomorrow, I'll set my paints up outside.*

- END -