

Heart of Steel by Kevin D. Miller

PART I - CHAPTER ONE

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 1920 – Twelve-year old Stanley William Puchalski runs for his life along a dusty country road. His mother’s pleas for him to fetch the sheriff echo through his mind. How did she escape her bindings? Who are these men, and what did they want with Papa?

The rhythmic pounding of his boots against the road are the only sounds now. His throat is raw from gasping icy winds. Sweat and tears blur his vision. His heart pounds. Excruciating spasms cramp his calves and thighs, causing him to stumble and limp. He pushes on until the sheriff’s office comes into view, revealed by early morning sunlight.

He presses his hand against a painful cramp in his side stopping only long enough to catch his breath. With hands braced on his knees, he lifts his eyes towards his destination. Heaving a final breath, he rushes to the entrance and bursts through the door.

FIVE DAYS EARLIER - The morn is clear and cool in Southington, Ohio. The Puchalski farm is a splendid, robust farm. Acres of crops are bathed in sunlight. Corn, cabbage, watermelon, and more, ready for harvest. Cattle and horses graze in lush grassy fields. A large orchard produces red plump apples, cherries, peaches and green crab apples. A small field of strawberries, raspberries and blackberries grow wildly behind the family farmhouse.

Stanley sits on a sturdy wooden fence in faded worn overalls. Both knees are exposed from shredded holes in the denim. The sleeves to his grungy-white cotton shirt are rolled to his elbows. Laces from his weathered leather boots dangle loosely and untied. His deep-set icy-blue eyes squint in protest from the rays of sunlight, having just peeked over the horizon. He removes a straw cap from his dirty blonde hair and brushes away beads of sweat from his brow. Chores begin early on the farm. He stretches his right arm into the air, arching his back, inhaling a deep yawn.

He tosses corn cobs to fat pigs as they roll around in the brown rich mud of their pigsty. “Here pig. Piggy piggy. Here, ya go pigs.” *Dang, now I know why they call you pigs.*

He hops off the fence and darts inside the family’s spacious barn. The oaken boards are weathered and stained red. A sturdy tin roof sits atop its walls. “Hey Maggie. What do have for me this morning, girl?” He slides a bucket under his favorite Holstein and tugs on her udders, creating a steady stream of milk and warming his hands at the same time. He patiently transfers and distributes each full bucket of milk into several two-gallon milk cans.

“Damnit, I’m starving. Hope Mama’s cook’n up something good. Hurry up, Maggie. I gotta go eat.” The Holstein snorts then bellows, lifting her rear leg, then setting it back down.

He sets aside four full milk cans marked for delivery after breakfast. A daily task he enjoys. It gives him a break from the more demanding chores around the farm. Sometimes his big sister Sophie gets to tag along and the two talk about life and share their dreams for the future.

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Stanley fills a small pail to the rim with fresh milk for the breakfast table. He walks outside the barn, setting the pail on the ground, allowing himself a moment to transfer the grime from his hands onto his overalls. He gazes as wagons, tractors, horses, plows and dozens of farmhands are hard at work, harvesting and tending to the vast, rich farm.

Grasping the pail, he walks toward the family farmhouse, a sizeable two-story Dutch Colonial building painted entirely white. A gray squirrel pops his head out of one of many giant shade trees surrounding the home as if to greet him or beg for food.

“I don’t have anything for ya. Better scram, or I’ll turn you into breakfast.” He climbs the steps to a massive porch and sets the pail next to the front door. He plops onto a weathered wooden rocker. “I need a break.” He spots a green mantis crawling along one of the sturdy white pillars that line the porch. His eyes follow the insect’s journey until he’s distracted and refocuses his attention on the far-reaching apple orchard being harvested by dozens of farmhands.

Wow. Look at all those apples. Twenty, thirty baskets, and the trees are still full. *Mm, Mama’s hot apple pie, topped with vanilla ice cream.*

The smoky aroma of bacon fills his nostrils, triggering his gut to grumble and churn and alerting him, breakfast is ready. He snatches the pail and slips through the screen door allowing it to slam behind him.

Mama cracks fresh eggs she gathered early this morning, dropping them one by one on a hot skillet. They sizzle the second they hit the iron. “Here’s the milk, Mama. What’s for breakfast? I need food for my belly.” She smiles. “Wash your hands first. Then you can eat.”

“Hey Sophie, don’t burn my bacon this time. Mama, don’t let Sophie burn the bacon.”

Sophie wrinkles her nose and sticks out her tongue. “Do what Mama told you to do. Go wash your filthy hands.”

There he is. Papa. Sitting at the table in his neatly-pressed overalls. Always wearing that same stupid T-shirt with the torn collar. His cold-blue eyes are mean and piercing. You don’t want to look him directly in the eye for too long. Not if you know what’s good for you.

Papa isn’t a particularly large man, he’s of average height, but he’s lean, broad-shouldered and muscular and he can outwork any man on the farm. Mama always said his thick chestnut mustache and square chin were handsome. But I don’t see it. All I see is an angry face. Angry all the time. Unless he’s going to the bar or kicking someone’s ass. The good ole boy of Southington. George Puchalski. My Papa. Maybe he won’t notice me since his face is buried in that newspaper.

“Stanley. Sit down at the table, boy”

“Yes, sir.” *Why do I always have to sit next to him?*

“Ha-ha, Billy. You’re getting more of that oatmeal on your head than in your mouth. Eat it. Don’t wear it. Mama, when does Billy get to sit in a regular chair? He don’t look too comfortable.”

“Billy! Stop playing with your food and eat right, boy.”

Great. Now I got Billy hollered at.

Seems like Billy gets most of the attention from Mama and Sophie. His round soft-blue eyes and ruffled white-blonde hair are hard for them to resist. He’s only three, but he’s a big kid. Way too big for that high chair. He can’t sit still for a second. And he can’t seem to find his mouth with that oatmeal.

Tap, tap, tap. Stanley reaches across the table and grabs Frank’s fork and whispers. “Frank, stop.” Frank frowns and stops tapping. Thirty seconds later. Tap, tap ...

The newspaper lowers. Papa slaps Frank in the back of the head. “Put the fork on the table where it belongs. Leave it there.” Frank’s eyes well. He glances at Stanley. Stanley mouths the words, “I told you.”

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Papa's voice is acrid and harsh. Its deep, raspy tone makes us all want to withdraw and hide. Frank gets really nervous around Papa. He's only two years younger than me, but he's almost as tall. He's built solid and stout for a ten-year old kid. His beefy thighs are held up by two man-size feet. I swear his toes look like fingers. His straight nut-brown hair always seems to look a bit oily and a few strands usually dangle in his face.

Six-year-old Annie fidgets in her seat. "When will breakfast be ready, Mama?" Papa pounds the table with his fist. "Quiet at the table!" And there that is. Papa's terrifying glare. Cold, dead silence is the temperature of the room now.

Annie's lower lip and chin tremble and her eyes well. She's frozen to her chair clutching an old rag doll she loves so much. She's wearing her favorite dress. A faded yellow cotton dress Mama made just for her. Her thick sandy-brown hair is pulled tight into two perfectly braided pigtailed. Her chubby cheeks quietly glisten with silent tears.

Billy breaks the silence and wails, reaching his arms towards Mama and flexing his fingers in a grabbing motion, begging Mama to pick him up. Frank hides under the table.

Sophie stares at Mama, mouth agape. She's only fifteen, but she bears the burden of a lot of responsibility. Papa expects so much from her. Too much. Maybe because she's the eldest.

Sophie routinely keeps her long chestnut brown hair pulled back into a tight bun. A few of the strands work their way out and hang over her cheeks. Her round olive-green eyes always seem to be looking downward. She purposely wears oversized clothes and her shoulders often droop. Probably from trying to hide her developing body and large bosom. It makes her look awkward. But Sophie has the sweetest heart and is the kindest, gentlest and most thoughtful person I know. She looks out for me and I look out for her.

Papa continues to glare. His brow furrowed. He wears a tight-lipped frown. So much anger in his eyes. Where does it come from? Maybe he didn't want a family? Are we that much of a burden on him?

Why are you so damn mean? Stanley's arms shake. He clenches his fists beneath the table. His throat tightens. *Just leave everyone alone.*

Stanley glances at Mama. Her gentle eyes smile, crinkling at the corners. She presses her index finger to her lips. "Sh."

Mama. George's wife, Stella. Always trying to make peace with the Devil. To keep the flame of his fiery temper on low. And to keep us all safe from his cruel wrath.

Mama is ten years younger than Papa. I think their marriage was arranged years ago in Poland when Mama was only thirteen. She keeps her full wavy brown hair pulled back into a perfect bun. Her amber-green eyes are round and doe-like and deeply set into her full round face. A face delicate and symmetrical in its beauty. Mama is slender, even after bearing five kids. The daily hard work on the farm keeps her fit. Or so she says. I tease her because she has to look up to talk to me now. Mama's voice is soft and pleasant. Her Polish accent is always evident and sometimes when she prays, she chooses to pray in Polish instead of English. She's never without her silver crucifix around her neck.

Mama serves Sophie, Frank and I scrambled eggs, bacon, potato pancakes and a tall glass of milk. She serves Annie eggs, bacon and a slice of buttered toast. She places a plate of steak and eggs Sophie prepared earlier in front of Papa. She accidentally slams his coffee cup on the table, spilling a few drops onto his T-shirt. He grabs her arm.

"Suka. Clean it up. Why are you so clumsy, Stella?"

Mama cowers, but yanks her arm away. Her brow raises and her jaw tightens. Her eyes are filled with pain and dark with anger. Is that a bruise on her left cheek?

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Why does she let him treat her like this? Why does she let him treat us like this? Stanley clenches his jaw, staring at his food. He grasps his fork. *I swear if he touches her...*

Mama sits at the table and folds her hands in front of her. “Lord, please bless this meal and bless our family. We thank you for all our bounty. In Jesus name, Amen.”

Frank clutches his fork, eyes darting between Mama and Papa. Annie plays with her food, breaking her bacon into tiny bits and mixing them with her eggs. Mama sits next to Billy who continues to fuss and sob. His whining is getting annoying.

She spoons the remaining oatmeal from his bowl into his mouth. “Open up, baby cakes. Eat like a big man.” Billy has so much oatmeal on his head you can barely see his hair.

Sophie sits quietly, politely wiping her mouth with her napkin and occasionally glancing at Papa’s steak. She spent the morning meticulously grilling Papa’s steak to just the right temperature and prepared medium-rare.

Papa cuts into his steak. Blood squirts and runs thick across his plate mixing with his eggs. He grabs the steak and hurls it at Sophie, hitting her in the chest, leaving a bloody stain on her white nightgown. She cries out. Her eyes always flutter when Papa frightens her.

“Goddammit Sophie. I said rare, not raw. Make me another steak, girl. Rare this time.” Mama uses a napkin to wipe a trickle of blood from Papa’s right temple.

Sophie’s eyes rapidly blink and water. She places another steak in the skillet. Mama glares at Papa, then looks away. She stands and takes a step towards Sophie, but Papa shouts, “Let her do it, Suka. She needs to learn how to cook a proper steak.”

Stanley locks eyes with his father. “Stop it Papa. Leave them alone.”

A slap across the mouth is followed by the taste of blood. “Enough out of you, boy.” The tingling burn on his cheek, ignites rage inside his heart. The fire soon dissipates at the threat of Papa’s scowl. Stanley looks away. *Why do I have to be so afraid of him?*

Sophie serves Papa the freshly cooked steak. She trembles and stands meek and quiet, hands folded in front of her, eyes still rapidly blinking. Everyone but Billy is holding their breath.

Papa cuts into the steak. He bites, then chews. He nods and points to Sophie’s chair. Sophie’s sigh brings the air back into the room. She returns to her seat.

Breakfast continues in dead silence. Papa slides his empty plate towards the center of the table. “Annie, help your mother clear the dishes. Stanley, take Sophie with you when you deliver milk this morning. Make sure you collect all the money. Frank, I want you to fill a dozen baskets of berries from the raspberry patch so your mother can make her jam.”

Sophie dashes upstairs to change clothes. Annie plays with her pigtails, staring at the table for a moment, then rises and collects dirty dishes placing them neatly by the sink. Frank slides his chair out from the table, making a godawful screech. He bolts out the door.

Chores are a welcome activity around here. Just to get out from under Papa’s roof and all his cruelty and the tension it brings. Stanley wipes his mouth with his sleeve. “I’ll be outside loading the milk cans.”

The old rusty Radio Flyer makes the milk haul a manageable chore. Four milk cans and the wagon is loaded. “Come on Sophie. I don’t want to spend all day delivering milk.”

Sophie steps outside and follows him. He’s already started walking pulling the wagon behind him. “Hold your horses. Geez. Wait up.”

The morning is cool and the air moist as they make their way along an old country road headed towards their first delivery about a half mile away. The smell of the onset of Fall lingers in the air. That earthy smell of leaves on the ground mixed with the cidery scent of decaying apple.

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The wagon bogs as it hits several potholes along the way. They enjoy the peacefulness and openness of the farm fields surrounding them, listening to the high-pitched chirps of Carolina Wrens and the intermittent knocking of a woodpecker in the distance. A soft breeze whisks across the tall grasses and bushy trees that line the well-traveled dirt road in the Ohio countryside. They look out across miles of green rolling hills and blue skies filled with an occasional fluff of white clouds.

“I’m really sorry Papa hit you with that steak. He’s so damn mean. I wish I was grown up. I’d sock him right in the nose.”

“It didn’t hurt that bad. I just don’t understand why he’s always so angry with me. I always seem to upset him. Maybe he just has so much on his mind that he needs to take it out on me?”

Stanley stops walking. Hearing Sophie take the blame for Papa’s temper doesn’t sit well. “No. He has no right to treat you like that. You do everything you’re supposed to and still he hurts you. It won’t be like that, when I grow up. I promise. I’ll always take care of you. I’ll stop him from hurting you ... and Mama ... for good.”

“Well good morning Stanley. Good morning Sophie. How’s your mama?”

Sophie smiles. “She’s doing very well, Mrs. Winfield. Thank you.”

Stanley lifts a milk can from the wagon and empties some of the contents into the Winfield’s billycan sitting on the front porch.

“Wow, Stanley. You are growing into such a strong young man. Here you go.”

He pockets two quarters. “Here are two extra nickels for the both of you.” Sophie’s eyes beam. Tips go into the other pocket.

They continue on their route, working their way along the road to the next stop. Stanley examines the nickels. “Hey, one of these is a Liberty nickel. See, look at the ‘V’ on the back.”

“Um ... that’s swell. We need to add them all to our stash under the old rock back home. How much money do you think we have?”

“I figure ... around seven or eight dollars. We can never let Papa know we have it, Soph, or that cheap old bastard will take it all. What are you going to do with your share? Donate it to me?”

“Uh, no...” Sophie pauses and speaks in a softer tone. “Don’t laugh. I really want to be a nurse someday. I want to help people. So, I’m going to use my half to go to nursing school. How ‘bout you, little brother? What do you want to do?” She glances at the holes in the knees of his pantlegs. “Maybe you should consider buying some new overalls.”

He glances at his overalls and frowns, then glances at Sophie. “Very funny.”

Stanley steers the wagon to avoid a small pothole in the road. “I don’t know. I think I want my own farm. I don’t want to work for Papa all my life. I want to work with my hands. Build stuff, ya know? Make lots of money, so I can take care of you and Mama and everyone. You all can come live with me. We’ll get away from Papa, for good. Leave that old bastard to drink himself to death.”

Another extra dime from the Johnson farm and two more nickels from Mr. Patterson. Time to turn the wagon around. Stanley grins. His eyes suspiciously glint. “Get in, I’ll pull you.”

Sophie crosses her arms, slightly shaking her head. “I don’t trust you. Last time you hit every pothole on purpose. Nope. I’ll walk thank you.”

“Oh, come on. That was an accident. You can trust me.”

“Sure, it was. Forget it... Hey, let’s head over to the cornfield and count our stash.”

The cornfield has grown tall. Plump ears dangle from its thick stocks. This part of the field has yet to be harvested. “There it is.” Stanley turns over a flat gray sandstone about the width of a frying pan. He pulls a small leather pouch from a hole in the ground beneath the stone. The leather is cracked and dry and the pouch sealed by a drawstring.

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“Count it. How much do we have?”

Stanley pours the coins onto the flat stone, separating them into piles of similar denominations. “Nine dollars and forty-five cents.”

He returns the coins to the pouch and places the pouch in its original hiding place under the rock. Sophie hugs him. “Ah. Get off me.” They continue to make their way back to the farmhouse where Stanley parks the wagon.

The heavy rusted handle of the well pump squeals and rumbles, sucking ice cold water from a well deep within the earth, up through pipes and out of a large iron faucet. The cold water is a shock at first, but it washes away the sweat and grime from his blonde head. Ah, that feels good. The frigid water quenches an arid thirst, leaving a dull ache in the back of his throat and a light throb in his temples. “So cold. But damn good.”

“Ahem.” Sophie stands behind him, arms crossed, tapping her foot. “Save some of that for me. Move.” She shoves Stanley aside.

Papa stands on the porch dressed in pressed high-waisted tan suit pants, a crisp white long-sleeved shirt and vest. He’s headed to town again.

Stanley shakes his head. “Why doesn’t he put his jacket on instead of carrying it on his arm? He thinks he’s an important politician or something, the way he acts. Ah, rhatz. He spotted us.”

“Stanley, Sophie. Come here.” They hurry to reach the porch.

Sophie snuggles next to Mama on a large porch swing. Mama places Billy in Sophie’s lap. Frank sits on the porch floor next to the porch swing. Annie rocks back and forth in the old rocker fiddling with her dress. She’s still clutching that silly rag doll. The best view of all though, is right here on the porch rail.

Here comes the speech, before he goes to town to get drunk.

“Attend to your chores today. No excuses. Be thankful for the roof over your head and the food I put on my table.”

Papa eyeballs Mama. That wicked glint in his eye always fills the air with tension. “Wife, handle the farmhands and let me know if anyone slacks on their work. Clean my house before I return. I better not come back and find everything a mess.”

Papa beams as he looks out across his farm fields. He juts his chin. There’s a twinkle in his eye as he watches his farmhands busy at work. Placing a derby on his head he steps off the porch and drives away in his 1919 Royal automobile. No doubt he’s headed to his favorite local speakeasy. The Vine.

“We have to tie the stacks of haybales together by weaving them crisscross like this to keep them from falling over. Grab the wires like this and use your knee to help throw it on top of the stack. You got all that, Frank? Give it a try. Put your fat ass into it.”

Frank grips a haybale by the wires and using his leg he attempts to swing it to the top of the stack. “Whoa, that was close. Ha-ha. Nice try. Get up off your butt and try again.”

The sound of an automobile approaching creates a churn of uneasiness in Stanley’s stomach. *What? He’s already drunk? He’s only been gone a couple hours.* The inside of the open barn door frames the scene. Papa staggers toward the house. “Frank. We’ll finish this later. Go play with Annie, okay?”

Sophie fills feed bags with oats for the horses. Frank and Annie slip and slide in the mud by the water pump. They all stop what they’re doing and freeze when they see Papa approach.

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Please just pass out today. Just go inside and pass out.

Upstairs Mama puts Billy down for a nap. She pauses when she hears the front door squeak then slam shut.

Dirty dishes from breakfast sit piled by the sink. There wasn't enough time to get to them. Dried oatmeal is stuck to the floor and to Billy's highchair. Toys are scattered around the living room floor. He steps on one.

"Stella!"

An icy chill travels up her spine. She lays Billy in his bed and closes his bedroom door behind her.

Papa stands in the living room with fists clenched. His brow is furrowed and his eyes are dark. His jaw is tight and veins swell in his neck. He glares up the stairs at her. A menacing glare she is all too familiar with.

Nowhere to run. Push past him. Run for the door!

He grabs her by the wrist. Whiskey, cigar smoke and stale perfume reek from his breath and his clothes.

"Let me go. Get away from me."

She can't breathe. The pressure on her neck is too great. "Don't *ever* talk to me like that, bitch. You're not even good enough to wipe the shit off my shoes." Fingers dig into her shoulders. He shoves her. She stumbles backward slamming her head onto the hard, wooden floor. A white flash and loud ring follow a throbbing ache in the back of her skull. The room is blurry. Her heart races.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Please don't hurt me, George." A blow crushes her ribcage. She gasps for a breath, moaning. He yanks her hair; lifting her off her feet. Her scalp burns. She attempts to grip her hair to prevent it from being ripped out of her head.

"You want more of this?"

Everything is surreal. She hears herself scream. The warmth of adrenaline courses through her veins. She kicks and flails her arms digging her nails deep into the flesh of his forearm.

Sophie rushes into the house. "Leave her *alone*."

Papa allows Mama to fall to the floor. He grabs Sophie by the hair dismantling her neatly groomed bun and yanking her towards him. He slaps her repeatedly. She cries and winces. Blood runs down her face and into her mouth.

"You don't know what's good for you, butting in where you don't belong. He hit her again and again. How do you like that? You like it? Do you?"

Sophie hits the floor in a thud.

She curls into a ball, but she can't protect herself from the kicks to her back. Each blow pounding her ribcage.

Stella punches and scratches at George's back. "Don't touch her."

Solid knuckles smash into her cheekbone. She stumbles backward and collapses to the floor in a heap. Sounds echo and fade as she tries to reach for Sophie. She can't make herself move, can't make herself do anything.

Everything turns black.

Sophie attempts to run out the door, but he grabs her, ripping her dress and exposing her large breasts. She desperately attempts to cover herself.

The sight of Sophie's exposed bosom sets Papa into a rage. He slaps her in the face, then lifts her and slams her into the sofa. "You think those bubs are going to save you? You're going to have some sweaty pimple-faced boy touching you?"

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Sophie cowers on the couch. He fumbles with the buckle of his leather belt. “No, Papa, no.” Sophie flinches from vicious lashes to her face and body. His curses become muffled. All she can do is curl into a ball, make herself as small as she can.

Papa wears down and stands over them, breathing heavy, sweat pouring from his reddened face. He slides his belt through the loops in his trousers and walks toward the front door.

Stanley blocks the doorway. “Get away from them.” He grips the wooden handle of a spade visibly shaking. He heaves a breath, ready for what comes next.

“Put it down boy. Put it down, or you’ll get the same.”

Backing down the porch steps, Stanley’s throat tightens. His heart pounds. His grip begins to slip from beads of sweat forming on his palms. Papa lunges. Stanley’s grip on the handle gives way. The spade flies harmlessly through the air. Papa’s open hands slam into his chest with a powerful shove. He can only watch as Papa steps over him.

Sophie covers her breasts, tucking the torn material of her dress into her bra. She crawls to reach Mama. Mama isn’t moving. “Wake up. Please. Mama please, wake up.”

Sophie’s muffled voice calls to her from a distance. Shades of light and dark swirl in front of her eyes, eventually coming into focus and forming the face of her terrified daughter. A face swollen and bruised with welts. Her left eye bloodshot. Blood congealing on her upper lip. The horrific sight causes Mama to weep.

Frank and Annie stand covered in mud, frozen with fear and hugging each other. They watch as Papa’s automobile disappears into the countryside. “C’mon Annie.”

The screen door creaks. Mama flinches from the sound, then sighs. “Come here children.” Covered in patches of wet and dry mud they rush to her side. Billy stands atop the stairwell crying. “Come here Billy. Come to Mama.” He waddles his way down the stairs whimpering and clutching a teddy bear.

Frank, Annie and Billy sit on the floor next to Mama and Sophie. Mama’s arms tremble with pain as she attempts to cradle them. The beatings are happening more often now, and with greater ferocity. Sophie has become a main target just like Mama. *Why can’t I stop this?*

Mama lifts herself from the floor, and helps Sophie to her feet. A wave of nausea overcomes her after seeing the full extent of Sophie’s injuries. They make their way into the kitchen. Mama splashes water onto her own face, then uses a wet towel to dap the blood off of Sophie’s face. “I promise. You will never have to go through that again my sweet girl. I’m so sorry.”

Mama points to the front door with a trembling hand. “Frank, take Annie outside and the two of you wash off by the well pump. Leave your clothes out there.”

Sophie whispers. “Mommy.” She buries her face in her mother’s bosom, wishing she could be small again; wishing to be safe in her mother’s arms.

With Billy on her hip, Mama takes Sophie by the hand and leads her upstairs. “Change into another dress.” She pulls a small valise out of a closet and packs it full of her daughter’s belongings.

Mama cradles Sophie’s face, her hands still shaking. “I’m taking you to Aunt Mary’s in Lisbon for a few days.” Sophie nods. Mama’s words carry hope and encouragement even in the face of such horror.

“Mama, what about you and Annie and the boys? Shouldn’t you leave too? He’s getting worse. What if he starts hurting them too?”

“We’ll leave soon enough. For now, we have to get you out of here. I’m afraid of what he might do next. You’ll be safe at Aunt Mary’s. He can’t hurt you there.”

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Mama and Sophie cautiously peek outside. “Billy, go with Frank and Annie.” Billy toddles his way over to the water pump.

Stanley sits on the porch railing sobbing. “Mama, I couldn’t protect you and Sophie. I tried, I’m sorry.” Tears roll off his cheeks. “I’m not big enough. When I’m a man, I’ll beat the tar out of him. I promise.” His eyes lower. Why am I so afraid of him?

Mama does her best to place her battered arms around him. “It’s okay, son. Stay here and take care of Annie and the boys. I’m taking Sophie to Lisbon, to stay with Aunt Mary for a few days. I’ll be back soon.”

Powerless to do anything, he wipes his eyes and hugs them both. “Be careful, Mama.”

Mama grabs the valise and takes Sophie by the hand. They lean on each other as they walk along the dirt road to the bus station. They struggle with each step, fighting through immense pain and dizziness. The bus station is a mile away from the farm. It may as well be twenty-five miles away. They’ll have to pass *The Vine* along the way.

“Mama, what if he’s there? ... at The Vine. What if he sees us?”

Stanley watches from the road, helpless as Mama and Sophie fade into the distance. Tears well in his icy-blue eyes, creating tiny streams of mud along his dirty cheeks. Grief crushes his soul like a sledgehammer pulverizing stone into sand.

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CHAPTER TWO

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 1920 – Activity begins to stir in the early shadows before dawn breaks on the farm. The morning’s chores aren’t enough to provide an adequate amount of distraction for Stanley. Focusing on simple tasks seems near impossible. Yesterday’s horrific events echo over and over in his mind, the way hands on a clock spin around and return to the place where they started, only to repeat the cycle again and again. *I miss Sophie.*

“C’mon Maggie, hold still. I need more milk, girl.” Stanley keeps the stream of milk flowing into the metal pail with his hands while his mind focuses on Papa. *How about I punch you in the face? Stomp you with my boot. Maybe when your sleeping, I’ll hit you with a bat and split your skull wide open.* “See how you like it.”

The Holstein grunts and kicks her leg. “Sorry Maggie. Settle down now, girl.” He snatches the pail of fresh milk and dashes to the farmhouse.

Inside, Mama prepares a breakfast of ham steak, eggs and fresh apple slices. Stanley fills two glass bottles with fresh milk from the pail. He sets one on the table and places the other in the icebox. Annie tugs at Mama’s dress. “Where’s Sophie?”

“She’s visiting. Eat your breakfast, sweetheart.”

Stanley joins Frank, Annie, Billy and Mama at the table. Papa’s seat is empty along with Sophie’s. Mama seems lost. She looks distant. Staring at the wall, barely eating, rubbing her temples. Her hands feel cold to the touch. Patches of purple and yellow cover her arms.

“Are you okay, Mama?”

Her far-away stare fades. Her round eyes focus on mine. Sunlight reflects within her loving amber eyes revealing tiny flecks of green. Never noticed those before. Her eyes sparkle and crinkle at the corners as she smiles. It’s hard to describe, but there’s a sadness that lives deep behind them. She tries to hide it, but it’s always there.

“I’m okay, son. I’m just thinking about Sophie. And I have this constant ringing in my ears that just won’t go away.” She can barely chew. She sets her fork on the table.

Papa didn’t come home last night. Mama has no idea where he went. Seems like she’s worried about him too. Mama once said he’s the only man she’s ever loved. How can she love someone so cruel? I’ll never understand that.

After breakfast, Mama sends Frank, Annie and Billy outside to play. Stanley wipes his mouth and gives his mother a gentle hug. “Everything will be okay, Mama.” A single tear runs down her left cheek. She pats his forearm. “Tend to your chores, son. I’ll bake you an apple pie later.”

“Ah ... I’ve been craving your apple pie for days. Can I have a whole pie of my own?”

Her short laugh mixes with a sob. “Of course, you can. I’ll make one special, just for you.”

The farm is quiet today. Some of the farmhands are off or working other farms. A few female farmhands balance on ladders in the orchard as they pick apples, filling their aprons with fruit and emptying them into wooden baskets.

Frank, Billy and Annie run around the property, throwing mud balls at each other until Billy gets hit in the head with a hard clod. He wails, and Frank and Annie try to shush him. Mama rushes onto the porch and discovers them attempting to cover little Billy’s mouth. She cradles him, kissing him on the head.

“Come inside now children. It’s time for naps.”

Heart of Steel by Kevin D. Miller

The old rocker makes a comforting sound as it creaks and rocks back and forth. Stanley whittles a wooden figure out of a piece of basswood with his pocket knife. Mama sits on the porch swing, content to have a moment to herself.

The soft breeze lulls her mind to sleep, only to be interrupted a few moments later by the sound of an automobile in the distance. Her chest tightens and her stomach churns. Her palms become moist. Body heat flushes her face forming salty droplets over her brow that trickle down her temples. Papa steps out of the automobile. Tension mounts with each approaching step. His suit is crumpled and dirty. His sleeves are rolled to his elbows. He looks like he slept in the woods all night. Her pulse throbs in her neck and the swish of blood resonates in her ears. She raggedly breathes.

Stanley stops rocking, but continues to whittle. *Touch her and I'll stab you.*

Papa stands on the porch before them. His head lowered, his eyes bloodshot and sorrowful. He sits next to Mama and takes her by the hand. His voice is raspy but soft in tone. "I'm so sorry, Stella. I don't know what came over me. I didn't mean to hurt you and Sophie. Can you forgive me?"

We've heard this apology a thousand times. It's part of the cycle and always predictable. She catches her breath as her heart rate slows. She meekly nods her head, absently rubbing her belly. Papa gives her a quick hug and walks towards the door. He pats Stanley on the shoulder. The spring of the screen door squeaks as Papa opens it, followed by a slam as it closes behind him.

She trembles. Her clothes are fitting tighter than normal. Her breasts are tender. She feels bloated and crampy. She closes her eyes and whispers The Lord's Prayer in Polish. With Papa passed out, the rest of the evening is uneventful and quiet.

Around nine o'clock at night, Papa emerges from his bedroom wearing faded Levi's and a white tank-top T-shirt. Frank, Annie and Billy are asleep upstairs. Mama sits at the kitchen table reading a newspaper. Stanley sits outside on the rocker. His whittled figure has come to life in the form of a squirrel. "Looks pretty darn good, if I say so myself."

Papa steps out onto the porch. "Son, let's go to the barn. I haven't given you a lesson in a few weeks. Get up. Let's go."

Swell. These lessons usually end up with me getting a bloody nose.

Papa lights a lantern on a work bench and grabs two pairs of old leather boxing gloves from the top of a haybale. He takes great pride in the glory of his boxing days back in Poland as a young man. He throws a pair to Stanley. "Put 'em on. Show me your stance."

Papa pulls off his shirt and slides his gloves on. He smacks the worn leather together, rolling his broad shoulders, and snapping his neck side to side making a loud crunch. Sweat glistens off the coarse hair of his solid square pectorals. He shakes his arms out, flexing the muscles of his thick forearms.

"Your stance looks good, boy. See if you can hold it." The smack of leather stings Stanley's left cheek. Papa points at him with his right glove, waving it up and down to draw attention to his lecture.

"Always keep your eye on your opponent. Don't ever look away. Even for a second. Let him know, you're not afraid."

Two body shots. Stanley's ribs burn and he struggles to breathe.

Heart of Steel by Kevin D. Miller

“In a street fight, there are no rules, son. Attack first. Don’t wait. Take your opponent down quickly. Kick him in the balls. Use the heel of your hand like this. Up through the nose. Use an open hand like this, across his face. And never, ever hit a man on the crown of his head. You’ll break your hand. Now, you come at me. Try to hit me in the face.”

A swing and a miss. Papa ducks. Another swing and miss. Leather smacks Stanley in the nose. He wipes his nose with his glove. Blood smears across the laces. *Never fails.*

“You’re hurt. What are you going to do? Gonna quit? Gonna cry? Or are you gonna be a man?”

The stinging on his cheek lights a fiery rage in his heart. He charges swinging wildly, landing punches to Papa’s rippled abs and ribs. Papa laughs. “Those are good punches, son. Okay. Okay. Very good punches. We’re finished for the night. Nice work, boy.”

Papa lowers his hands. *Now’s my chance. There are no rules, right?* Stanley smacks him in the jaw with a solid left hook. Papa’s head snaps backward.

“Boy. I said we were done.” Papa’s steely blue eyes grow dark. His brow lowers.

Stanley’s head explodes. White lightening rips through the back of his eyes. Why am I looking at the rafters? Papa’s voice echoes in the distance. “Now, we are done.”

Stanley gathers himself and dusts off the dirt and hay from his clothes. He wanders back to the farmhouse. As he approaches the steps, he finds the wooden squirrel he spent the afternoon whittling with so much patience and care, lying on the ground broken.

Early the next morning, Mama steps out of the house and walks towards the main road leading to the bus station. Papa must have left in the middle of the night.

“Mama. Wait up. Where you going?” Stanley rushes to meet her on the road.

“I’m going to check on Sophie. I’ll be back shortly. There’re some flapjacks in the kitchen. Make sure you save some for everyone.”

“Can we come? I’ll grab Annie and the boys. We miss her too, Mama.”

She pauses and stares for a moment. “Okay. But hurry. We must be back before your papa returns.”

Stanley sprints to the barn. “Come on Frank, we’re going to see Sophie.” Frank drops a hammer he was using to secure a loft beam and follows.

Annie and Billy are attempting to pump water from the well along with stomping in the mud as usual. “Come on Annie. Take Billy’s hand. Let’s go see Sophie.” Annie’s eyes widen and her tiny plump lips pucker. They follow Stanley and Frank to the road to meet Mama.

There’s a cool breeze this morning. White billowy clouds form in the eastern sky. Mama holds Annie’s hand as they make their way along the country road. “Billy. Stop farting on my neck, or I’ll put you down.” Billy giggles, holding onto Stanley’s ears as they follow Mama on their way to the bus station.

Mama has no automobile of her own, and she wouldn’t know how to operate one if she did. And if they had the luxury of a telephone, she could simply call Sophie. Electricity hasn’t found its way to most of the farms in rural Southington yet, let alone a telephone.

The bus ride was uneventful. They step onto a gravel road in Lisbon. Mama glances at the sky. “Hurry. Let’s walk fast before we get caught in the rain.”

Heart of Steel by Kevin D. Miller

Aunt Mary's home is modest. A yellow clapboard exterior with white trim. A small front yard with a three-foot embankment. A path of flat slate stones leads to the porch, lined on either side with beds of red, gold and orange marigolds. The porch floor is painted white with a variety of flower pots decorating the porch in a display of greenery and colorful autumn flowers. Aunt Mary has a knack for making the simplest of things beautiful and eye catching.

Stanley sets Billy by the front door. "Mama, let's have Billy knock." Sophie answers. "Oh, my goodness, Billy." She swoops him into her arms and steps out onto the porch. "Mama." Annie hugs Sophie's legs. Frank, Stanley and Mama complete the group hug. Mama caresses Sophie's cheek, gently examining her bruises.

Sophie partially smiles. "Come inside. Aunt Mary will be so surprised.

"Aunt Mary. Look who's here."

Aunt Mary places her hands on her cheeks. Her eyes pop open. "Oh, my gosh. What a nice surprise. Come in. Sit."

Stanley and Frank plop onto a flowery colorful sofa, while Annie and Billy sit on a blue and cream rag rug next to them. Sophie sits in an easy chair across from her family. Mama stands behind the sofa with her hands resting on Stanley's shoulders.

Aunt Mary smiles, running her fingers through her long dark brown curls. She places her hands on her hips. "Well. How is everyone doing?"

"We're doing okay, I guess. We just wanted to visit and check on Sophie. We can't stay long. I have to get back before George returns. I have no idea where he went, but we can't be gone too long."

Aunt Mary wipes her hands on her apron. "Can you at least stay long enough for some coffee? I baked a yummy cherry coffee cake yesterday."

Annie glances at Mama. "I'm hungry Mama. I want some cake."

Billy chimes in. "Me too, me too."

Mama perks up. "That's sounds delicious. Okay, we'll stay. But for just a little bit."

"Great. Follow me into the kitchen. Who wants watermelon? Sophie, can you cut up some watermelon for your brothers and Annie and take them out back?"

Billy frowns. Annie protests. "I want cake, Mama."

Stanley pokes Annie's stomach. "You don't need any cake, Annie. Besides, watermelon is good for you. You too, Billy. Let's go out back."

Annie and Billy run around the backyard slurping watermelon and spitting seeds at each other. Frank plays with Mary's dog, Brutus. A small, feisty Jack Russell terrier starving for attention. Stanley sits on the small porch steps near the backdoor. Sweet sticky juice drips from his chin. Spitting watermelon seeds is an art. You have to hold the seed on the tip of your tongue with just the right amount of air pressure and let it fly precisely at the right time.

Mary's husband, Syski steps off the living room stairway and enters the kitchen. "Stella, how are you feeling? You ever going to leave that crazy son of a bitch you're married to?"

"I'm doing much better but how can I can't leave him? Maybe paying someone six-hundred dollars to shoot him would be easier. Know anyone interested?"

"That much? Hell, I'd shoot him for eight bits."

Syski chuckles and pats Stella on the shoulder. He walks onto the front porch and sits in his rocker. He lights a cigar and blows circular puffs into the air. Stanley sits quiet on the rear porch. He can't help but hear the conversations through the screen door.

Yeah, sure Uncle Syski. Your skinny butt would be too afraid to shoot Papa. Your ass would be shaking and scared. He'd bust that big nose across your cocky face.

Heart of Steel by Kevin D. Miller

Mama, Mary and Sophie spend the next forty-five minutes sharing coffee, cake and small talk.

Mama slides her lips across her fork to savor the last piece of her coffee cake. "Mm ... I want the recipe for this. We really have to go now. Sorry we can't stay longer, Mary."

Mary nods and pats Mama's hand. "I understand. You know I'm here if you need me. Sophie has been a tremendous help around the house. She's such a good girl."

Mary glances through the screen of the rear door. "It's probably a good idea you get going, anyway. Looks like a storm is blowing in."

Mama gathers Annie and the boys. Together, they hurry back to the bus station.

When they arrive home, Papa is shaved and looking dapper. It's apparent he's been waiting on the porch swing for a long while. He storms down the porch stairs to meet them. "Where have you been? Where's Sophie?"

Her heart pounds against her ribs. Her stomach twists and cramps. She stammers. "I-I went to check on Mrs. Winfield and take her another dozen apples. You know ... she asked for three dozen but I-I ... just forgot. We only gave her two. I took the children with me ... and ..."

"And Sophie?" He pinches her arm.

She winces, then jerks her arm away. "I sent her away."

He clenches his teeth as he speaks. "Where did you take her? You need to bring her back home, now. She needs to be here working on the farm."

She places her hand on Stanley's shoulder. "Take Annie and the boys inside the house. Go."

"Mama, I don't want to leave you here."

"Do what I say. Go right now."

"Come on Frank. Grab Billy. Annie, let's go." Stanley herds his siblings into the house. He watches the scene through the screen door. *Don't you touch her, you asshole.*

Mama stands her ground. "I needed to keep her safe because of what you *did* to her, George."

He backhands her across the face.

She stumbles backward. "No! No more of this."

He grasps a handful of her hair and slaps her again and again. She drops to the ground in a fetal position hoping he'll stop.

He kicks her in the stomach, knocking the wind out of her. She gasps, struggling to breathe. A warm wet sensation trickles between her thighs. She grasps her dress, then looks at her hand. Blood.

She writhes and moans in pain, whimpering. *My baby. Please God, no. Please don't take my baby. Not another baby, Lord please ...*

"I can't watch anymore of this. Mama!" Adrenaline surges like hot fire through his veins. Leaping off the porch Stanley sprints toward his mother. "Leave her alone. Stop it." Papa turns to meet his charge. The face of a demon stares back at him. Eyes black and piercing. Teeth clenched. A sadistic evil grimace almost welcoming the confrontation.

Stanley flails his arms and manages to bust his father's lip. A flash of colors followed by intense pain rips through his skull like cherry-red iron. A loud buzzing fills his ears. Voices muffle and echo. Clouds rumble and roil above him. Raindrops begin to tap his face in soft sprinkles. The sky fades in and out of focus.

George stands over her. Staring at the pooling blood. He should just leave her there. He uses a hanky to wipe a drop of blood from his lower lip.

Heart of Steel by Kevin D. Miller

A farmhand hears the commotion and sees Mama lying on the ground. “Mr. Puchalski, your wife is hurt. If you don’t take her to the doctor right now, I will.”

“Mind your own damn business.”

He steps closer. “I won’t stand here and watch you beat this woman. Can’t you see she’s bleeding?”

“This woman is my wife and I’ll do as I damn well please. Now get your filthy black ass off my farm. You’re fired.”

The farmhand drops a spade he was clutching and stands defiant.

Papa doesn’t say another word to the farmhand. He ignores him. He doesn’t view any farmhand as his equal and won’t waste anymore words on him. He lifts his bleeding wife and places her into his automobile. He yells to his foreman. “Get this black bastard off my farm. Don’t pay him.”

“You brought this on yourself, woman. Look what you made me do. How are you going to do your work now? A wife is supposed to obey her husband. When are you going to learn that?” He speeds away leaving a cloud of dust in his wake.

Thunder rumbles in the heavens, warning of the impending storm. Black clouds boil ready to burst. *Why am I in the grass? How long have I been here?* “Frank?”

“Stanley. Come on. Wake up. Why are you laying on the ground? It’s starting to rain. Hurry.” Frank helps him to his feet. Cold rain explodes from roiling dark clouds above. They’re soaked when they reach the porch. “Take off your shoes and britches out here, Frank.”

Thunder explodes, shaking the farmhouse. Bright flashes of light illuminate the walls. Billy screams and buries his head in the sofa. Annie runs to Stanley. “Pick me up. Pick me up.”

“It’s just thunder, Annie. Stop being such a crybaby.” Annie’s large hazel eyes water. Her full round chin, trembles. Her cute little pigtails are too hard to resist. “Okay, okay. Come here.” He lifts her. She squeezes his neck, hiding her face in his chest. “Jeez, Annie. When did you get so heavy? Frank, sit with Billy. Make him stop screaming. He’s making my head hurt worse than it already does.”

“Billy, get under the blanket with me. It’s safe under here.” Billy scrambles beneath the blanket with Frank.

“Let me in too.” Stanley drops Annie on the sofa and she disappears under the blanket like a bug. He plops on the sofa. They listen as the sky crackles and booms. White flashes light up the room, followed by rumbling that rolls and fades into the distance. Strong winds and heavy rain pound the farmhouse, rattling windows and sending howling shrills through its walls. *What happened to Mama? Where did Papa take her?*

Hours later the storm has quieted. The screen door creaks open. It’s Papa. He’s holding Mama in his arms. He carries her to their bedroom up the hallway. He sets her on the bed and lays a blanket over her, then shuts the door behind him.

“What happened to my mother?”

Papa shoves him into the wall, out of his way.

He grabs Papa’s arm. “What did you do to my mother?”

Heart of Steel by Kevin D. Miller

His arm is slapped away. Stanley is face-to-face with clenched teeth and a menacing grimace. His air cut off from the pressure on his throat. Stanley's blood boils. He glares into the eyes of evil in complete defiance. Fear leaves his heart, replaced by fury and a level of courage he's never experienced before. He's not afraid anymore.

Papa releases his grip and shoves Stanley backwards, then leaves the house. Stanley sighs at the sound of Papa's automobile fading into the distance. *Yeah, stay gone. Don't come back.*

He sits on the bed next to Mama. He gently squeezes her hand, willing her to be okay. Mama slowly peers through bloodshot eyes. She smiles a feeble smile. His heart aches from the pitiful sight of her condition.

"Are you okay, Mama? What happened?"

She whispers. "I'm sorry son. I lost the baby. I just need to rest. Tomorrow we'll go to Mass and pray for God's blessings on our family. How are you feeling, precious boy? My brave boy."

"I'm okay Mama. But ... you were having another baby? Why didn't you tell me? Did Sophie know?"

"Sophie was the only one who knew. I wanted to wait a little longer before I told you. I'm sorry, son."

"It's okay. Just get some rest Mama. I'll check on you later." He kisses her on the forehead, then closes the door and walks to the living room.

"Frank, keep an eye on Annie and Billy for a few minutes. I gotta do something."

The air is damp and fresh. An occasional rumble can be heard in the distance. He walks into the barn. He slings a stone against the wall listening to the ricochet through the rafters. *Why are you so damn mean? Why do you have to hurt everybody?* "I hate you." He throws a flurry of punches at a bale of hay. "How do you like that, huh? I'll break your fucking nose. Hurt her again, you bastard. See what happens." He swings and punches the haybale until his arms and shoulders burn and twitch with exhaustion.

He stands there, out of breath, his knuckles bloodied and stinging. He stares, panting at the haybale like a prize fighter taunting a defeated opponent. It's no use, though. His father is so much bigger, so much meaner. He can't protect his mother or his sister or anybody.

He climbs a wooden ladder into the loft and weeps. Ten minutes go by. He dries his tears and descends the loft and walks back to the house, emotionally drained.

"Come on. Let's go outside and play." Stanley gives his siblings each a turn on the tire swing until the sun sinks in the western sky and daylight fades.

"Frank, Annie. Grab Billy. Let's go inside and get something to eat."

Annie pleads. "Come on. Just one more turn, okay?"

"No Annie. You need to eat dinner and get ready for bed."

He points to the front porch. "Last one in is a fat hog." Frank and Annie push Billy out of the way and rush up the porch stairs battling to be the first into the house. "Come on Billy. It's just you and me now." Sharp kick to the shin. "Ouch. Cheap shot, Billy." Billy darts up the porch steps. "I'm coming Billy boy."

Billy screams. "You da fat hog! Not me."

"Ha-ha. You win. I'm the fat hog, and this fat hog is going to eat you."

Billy shrieks and hides under the table. Annie jumps on the sofa giggling. Stanley presses his index finger to his lips. "Shh. You'll wake Mama. Frank help Billy get in his highchair. Come on Annie. Come eat."

Heart of Steel by Kevin D. Miller

The snap of a match and the smell of sulphur. He drops the tiny flame into the kindling inside the stove. He places a pot of left-over beef stew over the flame and sets homemade bread on a flat pan to warm.

Frank taps his spoon on the table. "When is Sophie coming home?"

Stanley shrugs. "I don't know. Maybe when she's feeling better. Finish eating so we can go to bed."

The light in the house grows dim as the sun fades. Stanley descends the stairway into the living room after tucking his siblings in bed. He strikes a match and lights an oil lamp sitting on a vanity near the front door. The lamp illuminates the room with a soft yellow glow.

Stanley plops on the sofa and lays his head on a pillow and closes his eyes.

The front door screeches. Papa stumbles into the house grasping a bottle of whiskey. His eyes are bloodshot. He stares and sways, mumbling in Polish.

The pathetic sight softens Stanley's heart. He helps him to the sofa and removes the whiskey bottle from his hand and sets it on the coffee table. Papa stretches out, continuing to mumble. "Stanley. I love you, son ... love you son. Where's my Sophie? Gimme my whiskey damnit ..."
Papa closes his eyes and passes out.

Stanley removes Papa's shoes and covers him with a blanket. "The rest of this whiskey can go down the sink where it belongs." He tosses the bottle into the garbage.

He pulls a towel from a kitchen drawer to wipe his hands, revealing a .25 caliber revolver hidden beneath the towels. It's loaded. The weight of it feels light. He stares at the revolver, then stares across the room at his sleeping father.