

The Devil's Grip
by
Casey Robb

Rusty Serrano woke with a jerk, sweating, writhing, gasping for breath. Again, that damn dream—a baby squeezed in a vise, in a grip, too smothered to scream. He steadied his breathing. The first morning rays of West Texas summer sun was flooding the room, casting flickers of lilac and crimson through the crystals on his dresser: blue calcite and rosy quartz.

Last night, he'd heard his mom's keys jangling as she came in late from her job at the café. He knew she would sleep in. His older brother Tate would be up any minute for his job at the car shop. Rusty, nineteen and out of school, had no job, nowhere to go. At least not today. But he had a plan.

He pulled out the bottom dresser drawer and fingered the papers he'd brought back from Alpine and hidden under his jeans. He hadn't told anyone. Not his mom. Not even Tate. Especially not Tate.

He listened for dishes clinking in the kitchen. Silence. *Good, no one's up.*

Rusty had cerebral palsy. One of those baby birthing things. Couldn't get out. He never got why. Was he not allowed to be born or something? His legs jerked this way and that, but his hands were steady and his mind was sharp: and another blessing—his good looks, with his black hair, blue eyes and lean physique.

Rusty pulled on his jeans, hoisted himself off the bed, and walked down the hall to the kitchen on two legs that carried him like clumsy stilts, his arms sweeping the air for balance—*like swimming ... or drowning.*

He opened the back door. The desert heat rolled in. He caught a glimpse of the lazy semi-

rural roads of Marathon, his small, stifling town. *Aptly named, too. Marathon—my life.*

He glanced down the hall, pulled one of his mom's Coors from the fridge, and downed half of it. "C-Can't let T-Taaaate see this." His CP put a twist to his tongue, to his lips, pulling out his words like Silly Putty. "M-Mr. Perfect T-Taaate."

Tate, with his dark brown hair and eyes, his easy smile, looked just like their dad. Or so he'd heard. He only knew his dad from photos and stories – stories about his dad's drinking, his lost jobs, his fights.

Then baby Rusty's diagnosis had arrived – cerebral palsy. *That must have been the last straw for the coward, Rusty often thought. He up and ran, like a chicken gizzard. Not even a trickle of kid support from the bastard – not from the bank and not from the heart.*

Rusty chugged the last half of the cold beer. He heard footsteps. Too late.

"Rusty!" Tate yelled. "What the hell are you doing? Put that beer down."

"N-Not your b-buuusiness!"

"That's Mom's beer."

"Sh-Sheee said I could have sooome."

"It's mine too. I pay the bills, don't I?" Tate was a mechanic now, helping his mom who could barely cover the rent. "And I say you can't have it."

"W-Waaatch me," Rusty said, and chugged two more gulps.

"At breakfast? Geez! What a lush. How are you ever going to get a job?"

"I-I'll get a job. You just waaatch. I'll do better. I'll get a careeer."

"A career? Are you nuts? You barely finished high school."

"Y-Yeah, but—"

"But nothing. Put the beer down and go back to bed, you stupid drunk."