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Opening extract from

Seeing Red

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Chapter One

The Sign

Folks don't understand this unless it happens to them: When your daddy dies, everything changes. He's not around any more to teach you how to drive a truck when Mama isn't looking, or tell you man stuff that J isn't old enough to hear, or listen to you holler when you're mad, and say, "I hear ya, son," while he lets you figure out what you're going to do about it.

Even if your brother is seven years old, he goes back to being a baby and acting more annoying than usual. Your mama turns into some kind of zombie, walking around aimlessly, in between fits of crying. And you want to cry, too, except you're the man of the house now and you know your daddy said he could always count on you, so you can't let him down.

porter's: we fix it right! That's what the sign above our car repair shop says. It was the truth, too. Daddy said us Porters had been taking care of vehicles around Stony Gap ever since cars were born. That's how come our street is called Porter's Shop Road. Daddy could tune an engine, fix a flat, smooth your dents, jump your battery – he even

managed to keep Miss Georgia's Rambler running, and that sickly old thing was held together with spit and prayers. I didn't know how anything could get fixed right again, now that Daddy was gone. Why couldn't the doctors fix him? How hard could it be to jump-start a heart?

I closed the shop door behind me and pushed the hair off my sweaty forehead. "It sure is a hot one, isn't it, Daddy?" Inside the shop I could talk to him out loud and nobody heard me. Not that there was anything wrong with talking to him. Heck, Miss Georgia still spoke to her husband and he died about thirty years ago.

I walked up the stairs in the back where Daddy had his office, taking in a deep breath of everything I loved. The shop was oil and gas and paint and dirt. It was brake pads, hoses, filters, and about any kind of tool you'd ever need to fix a car or truck. It was Lava soap, old rags, and a sink with a tap you could turn on with just your elbow. It was the last place I saw Daddy.

I sat down in the swivel chair at my great-great-grandaddy Porter's rolltop desk. Old Man Porter built our house, repair shop, and convenience store way back over a hundred years ago. Daddy called it the "holy trinity" because with the house and store on the road, and the repair shop in the middle behind them, the buildings made a triangle. "Don't worry, Daddy," I said, "I'm going to take care of this place. You know you can count on me."

At the back of the desk was a brass plate screwed into the centre drawer: FREDERICK STEWART PORTER. I was

named after my great-great-grandaddy, even though everyone just called me Red. I'd inherited his red hair, too. Daddy always said I'd inherit his desk because "it has your name written all over it".

A shotgun went off across the creek, and I jumped. "It's Mr Dunlop," I said, "after those raccoons again." As if Daddy wouldn't know. I wanted to close the window and block out Mr Dunlop's hollering even if the August heat killed me. But I sat back down when I heard Beau's voice rising from the What-U-Want – our convenience store, singing that hymn *Rock of Ages*. It was good to hear some singing coming from the What-U-Want, even if it left a lump in my throat. Daddy used to sing there all the time. And he used to sing to drown out Mr Dunlop, just like Beau was trying to do.

Sometimes when we heard Mr Dunlop swearing at his family, Daddy would pull a lock of hair over his forehead so he'd look like a rock singer and strut over to the food shelves. He'd wink at me, pick up a can of beans like it was a microphone, and belt out that Aretha Franklin song. Moving his hips like they belonged to Elvis Presley, he'd dance to the back door, throw it open, yelling, "What-U-Want…huh…huh…" and sing about wanting a little respect, spelling out the word loud enough to zing all the way past Mr Dunlop's shed, the Confederate flag on his front porch, and right into his ignorant head. The Dunlops were a whole line of bad blood, and we'd hated them since for ever. Except for Rosie, of course. It was hard to believe she was a Dunlop. Everyone loved Rosie

as much as they hated her daddy. Like Miss Georgia said, "That girl is so full of love, even her face is shaped like a heart."

I heard a car crunch onto the gravel between the house and the shop, and I sat up straight. Me and Daddy always tried to guess the type of car by the sound it made. He called me the Boy Wonder of Cars because I have a knack for understanding them. I guess it's in our blood. I listened to the car door as it opened and slammed shut. It wasn't as heavy as a pickup. It wasn't a high-performance car like a Corvette, either. "What's your guess?" I asked Daddy.

The kitchen screen door whined open, and Mama's voice gave a shaky hello. After that she called, "Red? I need to talk to you, honey!"

She probably needed help fixing some mess J made. That kid was like a tornado, running wild, causing havoc, and leaving everyone feeling bad. I took in a giant whiff of Goodyear tyres as I walked down the steps from the office and headed for the door. Before I opened it, though, I told Daddy what kind of car I thought was outside. "Late model four-door sedan, V-8 engine." I scrunched my face up to think real hard. "Chrysler or Chevy."

When I opened the door, dust was still settling from Mr Harrison's '71 Chrysler 300. "Yes!" I couldn't help smiling because Daddy would be proud.

Mama waved at me and opened her mouth to speak, but Mr Harrison said, "I know you want to get to Ohio as soon as possible, Betty, so I'll get to work right away."

Ohio? What was he talking about? We hadn't been to

visit Mama's family in years. Besides, they'd come to the funeral not two months ago. And with only me and Beau to run the shop and the store, it seemed like a funny time to go on vacation.

The screen door banged open and J screamed, "Ma-*maaaa*!" even though she was standing right there at the bottom of the steps. "The TV's all fuzzy and I cain't see a thing! I wanna watch *The Flintstones*!" He was half naked, wearing only his green briefs, and he leaned his head so far back, bawling, that his curly black hair touched his bare shoulders.

"It's all right, baby, I'm coming!" Mama looked at Mr Harrison, then me, and said, "Just give me a minute." I wasn't sure which one of us she was talking to, and she ran up the steps and into the house, her wrinkled black dress disappearing behind the screen door.

Mr Harrison puffed his fat stomach out and looked everywhere but at me. It was like I had some disease and grown-ups didn't know what to say or do around me. So I looked at his car. He could afford a new one every other year seeing as how he was both a real-estate agent and an insurance agent. He had what Daddy called a "healthy business", which is a polite way of saying he was rolling in dough. Daddy said there were only two things slimier than Mr Harrison: a leaky oil pan and a big-city lawyer.

I heard J screaming another tantrum inside and Mama saying, "I'm trying, baby, I'm trying."

I decided to take charge, since I was the man of the place. "You want your oil changed, Mr Harrison?"

He acted all surprised, like he'd just noticed me. "Oh, well, son, that's nice of you, but I think Beau's got enough to handle over in the store right now."

I tried not to let my voice sound like I thought Mr Harrison was ignorant. "I know that, sir. I can change your oil for you."

Mr Harrison stared at me for a moment. His eyes moved over to the What-U-Want and back to me, like he was deciding which was worse, having a dumb kid change your oil or a retarded grown-up. Not that I thought Beau was a retard, but most everyone else did. Daddy said Beau might be on a different track from the rest of us but sometimes he was way ahead, and that Beau's mind raced around so much, you could get whiplash just trying to keep up.

Finally, Mr Harrison made his choice. "Beau!" He yelled so loud Miss Georgia could probably hear him even though she lived half a mile away.

I heard the jangling bells on the front door of the What-U-Want and Beau's lumbering footsteps coming down the stairs and across the gravel.

"Yes, sir, Mr Harrison, sir?"

"You got time to let young Red here help you with an oil change?"

I looked at Beau hard, not because I was mad at him, but because I was mad at Mr Harrison. Still, Beau gave out a little moan and sank his three hundred pounds lower into his baggy jeans and giant blue shirt. He reached a hand up and tugged at the tufts of grey hair that stuck

straight out from under his Quaker State cap. "I-I guess so."

A couple of minutes later, the three of us and the Chrysler were in the shop.

Mr Harrison was stuffing his red tie underneath his vest but there was barely enough room in there for him, never mind his tie.

"Yes, sir," Beau said, "Red is real good at oil changes. I-I think he might could be better than me." He fingered the fancy red letters Mama had sewn on his shirt: BEAU. "Plus, I should go back to the What-U-Want." He said it almost like a question.

Mr Harrison squinted his eyes at me. "How old are you, boy?"

"Almost thirteen."

Beau coughed and tugged his hair again.

The truth was, I'd just turned twelve. "Well, I'm a good solid twelve, and I've been changing oil since I was nine. By myself." I wanted to say, *Who do you think has been changing your oil for the past three years?*

Mr Harrison shook his head, chuckling. "Huh, I think an oil change is too much to handle even if you're a good solid twelve."

How come when it's something you want to do, grown-ups say, "You're only twelve," but if it's something you don't want to do, like homework, it's, "You're almost thirteen years old, for heaven's sake!" and they act as if you ought to have been doing it since the day you were born.

"I can hack it," I said loudly, and picked up a new filter from the shelf for a '71 Chrysler 300 and the right-size wrench, along with the oil pan and some rags.

Mr Harrison was wiping the sweat off of his face and eyeballing me. "What about oil? Don't forget to put the new oil in."

I took a deep breath the way Daddy always did when customers said ignorant stuff like that, and answered slow and patient, "Yes, sir, Mr Harrison, but I can't reach the top of the engine to pour in the new oil while your car's up on the jack. We'll need to bring her down to ground level. Then I'll be putting four quarts of top-of-the-line Quaker State motor oil 10W-40 in your engine to keep this baby running real smooth."

Mr Harrison grunted like he was a pig and I was a low-class piece of dirt not worth rubbing his nose in. After he watched me drain the oil, he followed Beau out of the shop, still grunting. I swear, he made me want to do something bad, like leave the oil out of his engine on purpose, but messing up would only let Mr Harrison say he was right all along that no twelve-year-old can change oil. I let out a sigh. "I know, Daddy. We fix it right, and I will."

I'd already lowered the Chrysler on the jack and was pouring the new oil in when I heard a pounding outside and figured Mama must've given Beau another job to do or J was up to no good. Either way, I decided to ignore it. Until the shop door opened and I heard Beau's voice, nervous-like. "Red?"

"Almost done, Beau," I said, screwing on the oil cap.

"Red?" He said it so pitiful, my scalp prickled.

I turned around fast. He was tugging at his hair with both hands and his face looked fit to start bawling.

"What's wrong, Beau?"

"Out there." He looked over to where the pounding was still coming from. "Your…your mama…" We heard a few more taps. Like the final nails going into a coffin.

I felt as if my insides were turning to ice and I froze for a moment. Then I pushed past Beau and ran out the door.

I stopped dead when I saw Mama. She was standing there with Mr Harrison. There was nothing wrong with her. It was the sign that was wrong. The new sign in front of our house. FOR SALE.