

FRANK
VAUGHN,
KILLED BY
HIS
MOM

Welcome to
Alabama
the Beautiful



D. KRAUSS

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WARNING: This book will offend you. Or, it will remind you.
Possibly both.

To the other walking wounded.

Thanks, Jayne!

**FRANK
VAUGHN,
KILLED BY
HIS
MOM**

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CHAPTER 1

Butch sat on the porch watching the girls skip rope:

"Frank Vaughn, killed by his mom
Lying in bed alooone,
She picked up a bat
And gave him a whack
And broke his head to the booone
One, two, three, four, five, six, seven..."
...and so on.

Cindy reached the twenties before snagging a toe, but Frank's mom couldn't have hit him that many times. A lot, but not that many.

Immortalized in skip rhyme. Amazing. It had been what, only a week? Frank was still on TV. Pat Jarrod, the Channel 7 news anchor, was all grim last night while narrating the film of Frank's dad escorting Frank's mom, very pretty in a silk dress and beehive hairdo, into the Lawton Court House. Mr. Vaughn was wearing his class-A uniform and dark glasses and looked like the President of Vietnam, and his wife looked like Mrs. President of Vietnam.

"They're Filipino," dad said.

Could've been a state visit, except no one was happy.

Butch was surprised when Frank's dad helped Mrs. Frank up the courthouse stairs. Odd. He should be really mad at her, but there he was, being nice. The girls weren't being nice; they were making fun of Frank, which wasn't right. It wasn't Frank's fault.

Cindy was in again and the others—Lynn and Debbie, Carla from down the street, Maria and Joseph (who might as well be a girl), and some random passersby—were doing their best to trip her up while staying on the Frank call. You'd think they'd get tired of it, go on to "Spank" or "Battleship," but no. Butch should go over and tell them to stop, but that would invoke the deadly kid "Ewww!" response and its follow-up, "Go away, you big baby, we'll do what we want!" and even Cindy would join in because this was the herd, although she'd be gentle. He'd be humiliated and might get his suit, the same one he wore to Frank's funeral, dirty, which meant a beating and not going to Dale's graduation. Best to stay here.

Graduation. Sure making a big deal. All of them dressed up, even Art with

some put-together shirt and skinny tie that wasn't a suit at all, something Butch, with great delight, repeatedly pointed out. Cindy had on a flowered dress with a yellow silk belt and Mom had brushed her red-blonde hair until it was full and fluffy and floated like a cloud, as it did now inside the rope... twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six. She wouldn't get dirty.

Never did. Even when they had mud ball fights and slid head first, screaming and laughing, down the crap hills piled up by the bulldozer guys building apartments near the ball fields, only Butch came back with twenty or thirty layers of dirt hiding his identity. She was untouched. She was perfect.

She was beautiful.

Butch watched her, and his heart soared and knew he was lucky to be her brother... okay, adopted brother. All the boys wanted to cut the string on her finger but she wouldn't let them, and all the girls wanted to play with her, just her, but she played with them all, no favorites, her laughter ringing up and down the hallways of B.C. Swinney Elementary.

Because of Cindy, the bullies more or less left Butch alone and the other kids tolerated his goofiness. In any other family, that'd be enough. But she favored him, him, over the smart, handsome boys who pursued her on the playground and the sophisticated girls who called her on the phone. Butch was her sole companion when she ran through the alley and over the crap hills. They rolled down the slopes together until they were so dizzy that earth and sky blurred and then they lay on their backs and made things out of clouds and said their secrets and never, ever, told on each other. She didn't call him stupid or spaz or any of the other names everyone including dad did; she covered for him, made him look better than he was. She'd somehow disentangle him if he went over there and screamed at the girls for making fun of Frank. Without her, he'd be dead.

Just like Frank.

Tommy walked up the mile-high steps onto the porch and scooted Cha Cha, who lay next to Butch, out of the way. The dog smiled good-naturedly as Tommy sat down and handed Butch a *Journey Into Mystery*, "To Kill a Thunder God"! Good cover with the Destroyer on it and Butch flipped to "The Crimson Hand," one of the *Tales of Asgard*. He'd already read it, but he liked to re-read things he liked, and the Norse myths fascinated him. Tommy had *X-Men* #12, "The Origin of Professor X"! and Butch glanced over. His copy was in the house. He and Tommy had bought probably the last two left at Carl's Drug Store, thank God, before someone else got them. Good issue, but he wasn't sure which origin story, Professor X's or Juggernaut's, was the more compelling. Juggernaut was magic, not a mutant. That made him hard to defeat.

Tommy caught his glance and shook the X-Men at him. "You wanna read this one?"

Yes, but Asgard first so Butch finger-waved him away, already back on the *Hand*. Tommy grunted and turned to the page showing Juggernaut at Professor X's feet, helmet off, surprised by a Professor X-guided Angel attack. Butch momentarily abandoned Asgard for Juggernaut's terrified face. There's always a

weakness. Just had to find it.

"Why you all dressed up?" Tommy asked.

"Dale's graduation."

"Oh." Tommy nodded and looked at the girls. Tommy was in sixth grade now but, next year, on to middle school. Next week Butch turned ten, double-digits at last, teenagery mere scattered months beyond, a birthday of grand implications heralded with cupcakes and ice cream and singing and presents and maybe, please God, that longed-for GI Joe. Butch looked forward to it with all the twittery anticipation of a Christmas morning. But their mutual promotions might have a dangerous effect on their friendship.

Tommy lived right next door, very convenient for a best friend, and there were hardly two hours straight in the day that Butch wasn't at Tommy's or the other way around. They played army, with Tommy the Americans and Butch the Germans, or Civil War, with Tommy the North and Butch the Rebs, or Marvel, with Tommy as Dr. Strange or Reed Richards and Butch as Dormammu or Doctor Doom. Occasionally, Chuckie from two doors down joined them when he wasn't in trouble, or Dale (funny that he had Butch's sister's name) from across the street when he was visiting his aunt. But those were interludes Butch really didn't like because, invariably, Chuckie or Dale teased Butch about something stupid he did or said and Tommy let them continue until Butch cried and went home.

The best times were right now, side by side, reading Marvel. Tommy got him started a few years ago, dragged Butch and his weekly quarter off to Carl's. "Don't buy baseball cards, jerko, lookee here!"

Tommy had spun the magazine rack to a slot containing *Fantastic Four* #1 with that big green thing coming out of the street.

Wow.

Butch liked Batman, and Sergeant Rock and the tank haunted by the ghost of General Stuart in *GI Combat*, but this! He bought the *FF* and a *Two-Gun Kid* and still had one cent left over for bubblegum with a Luis Tiant and Tug McGraw inside to trade later.

So who's the jerko, jerko?

They had raced to Tommy's back porch and Tommy read the comics aloud because Butch couldn't read yet. First grade was still months away, and he hadn't gone to kindergarten like Cindy and Art. If it hadn't been for those comic books and *Green Eggs and Ham*, Butch wouldn't have had a clue what a letter was, much less whole words, when he walked into Miss MacDonald's first-grade class that fall.

Now, look at him. He read as well as Tommy, maybe better. Butch had read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* five times already, loving each pass-through. Miss Hale, the most beautiful second-grade teacher in the world, had read it to them during story time. Enthralled, Butch had pestered her to do so again, and she asked, "Would you like to read it for yourself?"

Would he!

"Maybe a little advanced, Butch, but if you think you can do it..."

He sure did think he could do it. Hadn't he blasted through the *SRAs*, didn't he swap *Happy Hollisters* with the third graders and wasn't he a Marvel True Believer? She lent him her copy and he finished it in a week, and Miss Hale was so astonished she gave it to him when school ended. He could read anything now, couldn't he?

Call me a bookworm, dad, I don't care.

But all that was in jeopardy. If there was one group of kids with which middle schoolers had no truck, it was elementaries... like Butch. Butch would ascend to the middle grades when Tommy was already in ninth, one year away from high school, and ninth graders had even less truck with seventh graders. Their friendship was aging out. It was more than likely that this summer was the very last time that he and Tommy could, or would, remain the best of friends.

That prospect gave Butch the chills, and he glanced apprehensively at his very best friend in the entire universe and, oh my God, look at this, Tommy was still on the girls. Butch frowned. Tommy had the narrowed eyes that dad got whenever he looked at bent-over girls or girls walking by in their bathing suits. Butch always looked away feeling guilty, even though he didn't understand why. Dad, though, stayed on them; smiled, too.

Wait. Wrong word—'leered,' yeah, that's it. An ugly word. But appropriate.

Tommy's gaze was on Lynn, who had taken over one end of the rope, and Butch got mad. Lynn, although closer to Tommy's age, was his, dang it! And nobody else's narrowed-eye target. "Hey!"

Startled, Tommy looked at him. "What?"

Butch pointed at the *X-Men*. "You done?"

"Yeah. I thought you had it."

"I do, but it's in the house. Trade."

Tommy made an exasperated sound and swapped the books. Butch smiled secretly.

"You heard what's going to happen with Reed Richards and the Invisible Girl?" Tommy asked.

"What?"

"They're getting married."

"Really?" Intrigued, Butch said, "How do you know?"

"The Annual."

Butch considered. "What if they have a kid?"

They looked at each other. "*Whoaaaaa!*" erupted simultaneously and they laughed and slapped backs and crowed as Cha Cha, ever ready to share enthusiasm, sat and barked along, as the two, well, three of them, speculated what powers the kid would have: the ability to stretch an invisible hand or force field across an entire city, or maybe something entirely different. Would the kid be classified a mutant, which meant attending Professor X's school, or an accident, like Spiderman, and remain with FF, which would then become F5? They had a very stimulating discussion.

"Time to go!" mom called from behind them.

They both jumped as the rope skipping dissolved and Cindy made her goodbyes and Cha Cha fled to the kitchen. Mom looked down at the boys with suspicion, then smiled and said, "Hello, Tommy."

"Hello, Mrs. Deats," Tommy said, ever polite to adults.

"How's your mother?"

"Fine, ma'am." Tommy's mother, willowy and pale, disappeared for hours into bedrooms. Something sinister about that. She seemed frail, and Butch held his breath around her, afraid he'd give her a cold or something. He'd never seen her sick nor had Tommy ever said she was, but mortality hovered about her and Tommy looked grim whenever the conversation turned in her direction.

"Well, tell her I was asking, will you?" Mom smiled again, and it was warm until she caught sight of the comic books and her brows furrowed. "For the life of me, boys, I don't see the attraction."

Butch held his breath, suddenly fearful of confiscation, but Tommy, good with adults, said, "I know, ma'am. They seem stupid, but we really like them." He gestured at Butch. "Butchie learned to read with them."

Mom scrutinized Butch; she shared dad's sentiment that he spent far too much time with his nose stuck in books and comics. "Yes, well, I suppose, but I think you learn bad words from them."

"Oh, no, ma'am," Tommy was solemn. "They wouldn't let us buy them if that was so."

Mom looked ready to debate that but Cindy flounced up, all whirling skirt and hair, and gave Butch and Tommy a dazzling smile that melted them both. Sure enough, she wasn't even sweaty, although Mom fussed and pulled at things as she breezed by.

Mom turned to Butch. "We have to go," insistent. He stood and socked Tommy in the shoulder while hissing, "Don't call me 'Butchie!'"

Tommy grinned and mouthed it as Butch stomped through the door, looking down to avoid a stumble. To his horror, he saw a dirty spot on his trousers. Jeez! He hadn't even moved!

Mom stopped him halfway in the foyer, Cindy long gone, and he was dead. Dead. He could already feel the tears rising to greet the inevitable slap and banishment to the bedroom and missing the graduation—which wasn't a bad prospect—and Thursday night television, which was.

Why does this stuff keep happening?

Mom knelt down. "Are you all right?" she asked softly.

He blinked back the tears he had placed for immediate aid and dispersal and stared at her, confused. "What?"

"Are you going to be okay?" she fussed with his collar, adjusted the lines of things, and pointedly ignored the dirty spot.

Again, what? What's this?

Butch got a little scared. "I... yes, I guess. Mom?"

She stared back, dark eyes and short dark hair and puffy cheeks, endearing in a mom, all pulled into worry lines. She pulled him into a hard, lung-shattering

hug. "You know I love you, don't you?"

Shocked, Butch dropped into a defensive spasm that ended up as an unintentional hug back. Breath caught in his squeezed chest and turned quickly into a held-in sob because mom was always in pain, such pain, and it wasn't fair, and he had to make it right because no one else would. "Yes, mom, I know." The sob escaped.

She squeezed him tighter. "I'm sorry I've treated you so badly these past few weeks. I didn't mean to."

Past few weeks? part of his brain chided. How 'bout past few months? Past few years?

"S'okay, mom." More sobs and the tears he'd reserved for the dirty pants switched allegiance, a couple springing loose and making a break for it down his cheek.

She pushed him out to arms' length. "You think ..." she stopped and frowned and looked to her left.

Butch clutched at her arms.

What do I think, mom? That you don't love me the way you love your real children? That you only tolerate the Foundling out of Christian charity but deep down you wish I weren't here? Are you going to tell me that's not true? Then show me!

"Your dad's there," she muttered and straightened his collar as though she'd been doing that all along and surreptitiously wiped his tears before Butch looked over her shoulder to see dad, in his dress uniform, half hidden in the door, face shadowed and roiling. The Watcher from the Dark, terrible and deadly.

Icy fear shot through Butch's heart because dad knew, knew, he'd been crying, and dad hated that. "You wanna cry? I'll give you something to cry about!" and the whistle of belt or whip made good the promise.

"Are we going or what?" dad said from around the perpetual cigarette in his mouth.

Mom nodded and said nothing because there was a good chance her voice was choked with the past moments and dad'd hear it and pounce anyway. Butch risked a look. Dad glowered at them but turned for the kitchen and the dangerous moment passed.

Mom squeezed his arm conspiratorially and stood up, straightening her skirt so Butch could use it as a shield to get into the hallway. "Wash your face," mom called after him, sounding more like her old self in that.

Butch felt conflicted. Survived another moment. But lost one, too.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

D. Krauss currently resides in the Shenandoah Valley. He's been a cottonpicker, a sod buster, a surgical orderly, the guy who paints the little white line down the middle of the road, a weatherman, a gun-totin' door-kickin' lawman, a layabout, and a bus driver, in that order.

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