

EARTHWEEDS by Rod Little

— SONS OF NEPTUNE BOOK 1 —

CHAPTER 1

A curved ribbon of dirt split the forest and formed a thin, uneven path to the lake. At the end of this path lay a portly man from the city. His body rested slightly askew in a seated position at the base of a maple tree, his back pressed against the trunk. One lifeless eye stared blankly at the peaceful lake; the other eye was gone. The right hand grasped a rolled-up piece of paper that now trembled in the breeze. The other hand still held the gun.

Two brothers, a high school student and a college student on summer break, stood over the dead body for several minutes, studying it. After camping in the woods for over a month, this disturbing scene was the most interesting thing to happen all summer.

“I guess this ends our vacation,” said Shane, the older brother. “Soon the woods will be crawling with cops. All the game will be scared off.” He didn’t really care; the trip had been lousy from the start.

“*Jeez*, man, the guy is dead,” Sam spoke in a half-whisper, the way one instinctively lowers his voice in front of the dead. “Think of someone besides yourself and your vacation.”

“I didn’t mean it that way.”

Shane’s younger brother, Sam, crouched down and took the piece of paper from the man’s hand, trying not to touch the skin of the dead fingers. He unrolled it and read aloud: “If anyone finds this, I saved another bullet in my pocket for you.”

“That’s creepy,” Shane said, resting his hands on his hips, but keeping his distance.

Sam squinted up at his brother against the morning sun. “Why would he save a bullet for us?”

“I guess he’s saying whoever finds him will want to kill himself, too.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” said Shane. “Why don’t you look him in the eye and ask him? He’s only got one.”

“Weird,” Sam mumbled. He stood up and pushed his bangs out of his eyes.

The dead man wore a business suit and tie, immaculately pressed and clean, except for splatters of blood across the tie. This was no hunter. This man came from the city to end his life outside in the open air, here at the lakefront.

“Do you suppose this lake meant something to him? He came up here to look at it before he... you know, cashed out?” Sam asked, but it was more of a statement than a question. He stood up and backed away from the body. The paper clung to his hand.

“Maybe we should put his body in the jeep; take him back. Animals might drag it away, or pieces of it. They might eat it.” Shane grudgingly stepped forward and rifled through the man’s clothes for a wallet or ID, but all he found were two dimes and a quarter.

“I don’t think so.” Sam bit his lip, thinking. “We shouldn’t touch it. This might be a crime scene. Maybe the cops should look at it as it is.”

“You watch too much TV.”

“Maybe. But don’t move the body. Okay?”

Shane was happy to comply. He certainly wasn’t looking forward to carrying a dead body anywhere today.

They passed the man’s Prius on the way back to their campsite and peered through the windows. The seats were empty and clean. A new box of bullets sat on the dashboard, minus two. Sam still held the man’s crumpled note.

I saved another bullet in my pocket for you.

Sam folded the note and slipped it into the pocket of his shirt. Then he reconsidered and slipped it under the windshield wiper of the man’s car.

Let the police find it, he thought.

The boys pulled up the tent and packed their gear. Surrounded by the green of the forest, Sam stopped to look around one last time. The trees, rich with life, filled the air with clean oxygen while their leaves chatted back and forth in the wind. He took a deep breath of fresh air, maybe the last pure air for awhile.

Sam Summer was a tall boy, an inch over six feet, but slim. Being the tallest boy in class made him uncomfortable in a way that only abnormal kids can understand, whether they are fat, short, handicapped... or tall. He avoided attention at all cost, and craved solitude. Rarely caught wearing anything beyond his jeans and white sneakers, and usually a rock band t-shirt with a blue flannel over it, he blended as best he could. His thick brown-blond hair was always a bit too long for his mom’s liking. She said he looked too much like one of the *Hardy Boys*, whoever they were. Often going out of his way to make himself smaller, either by sitting or hunching his shoulders, he received more than one scolding from their mom when she was alive. She wanted him to stand tall and stand out; he just wanted to fade into the wallpaper.

Shane Summer was two years older, sturdier, but not as tall. At five-eleven, he had a strong, athletic build, and Sam envied him for that. While Sam’s hair was always long, Shane’s was forever cropped short. Shane wore hunting boots and jeans, and always a flannel shirt. His color palette was wider than Sam’s, but the material stayed the same—and his sleeves were perpetually rolled up a few inches to the elbow. When he found something he liked, he stuck with it.

Both boys had tan skin year-round from spending most of their time outdoors. Their mother often complained they should use sunscreen. She worried about sunburn, cancer and everything else from poison ivy to pollen. She nagged out of love, and they had only fond memories of her. And the problems of sunburn would seem absurdly minor in a few days.

Changes in the world had already begun three days before the boys stumbled onto the dead body. Before the next sunrise, Shane would shoot a number of bullets and arrows to save the lives of his brother and others. Sam would do much more. They didn’t know it yet, but these would be the last restful moments of their lives. It’s funny, since we never know such events are in motion, we never take the

time to enjoy the calm before the storm. Sam was no different, and failed to fully appreciate their last few minutes of tranquility deep in the woods.

Soon they would drive back to Shane's college campus and find it empty. The mystery would take them down a dark road. For now, that road was miles away.

The boys' two-month camping trip was supposed to be a last attempt at clinging to their youth. This marked the end of a school break for Shane—soon to start his third year at the University of Pittsburgh—and the start of Sam's freshman year at the same school. The recent high school graduate was eager to be rid of his elementary years, but was nervous about going to a new school. Things hadn't always gone so well in high school, partly because he wasn't the same as other kids.

Sam wasn't just tall. Sam was different.

For several days, they had seen no deer—and few other animals, for that matter. The hunting had been slim this year, and the woods a bit too quiet. The boys always hunted by longbow, so as not to scare the game. If anything had spooked the animals, it was something or someone else. Nothing felt right today; they had sensed it was time to get back home, even before the dead body. Finding the suicide victim merely clinched their decision to head back a week early.

They hopped in the jeep and drove out of the woods on a bumpy path made up of dirt and rocks. The ride was rough and uncomfortable, but the path eventually became a paved road. It would take a few hours to get back to the city.

“Can I drive?” Sam asked.

“Yeah. That would be, *No*.” his brother said smugly. “I drive my sweetheart. She only responds to me.” Shane thought of his jeep as his best friend. In a peculiar way, maybe even his girlfriend.

Sam gave in and leaned back in his seat. He watched the trees flick by, one after another, like a filmstrip, as the wind flipped his hair back and forth in his eyes. He played with a spark of electricity between his thumb and forefinger, then rolled it into a small sphere, like a marble, over the back of his hand and in between his fingers.

“Be careful with that,” Shane said. He always said that. More mature, he kept an eye on his brother, partly because he had promised their mom; mostly out of his own concern.

“Yup.”

“I mean it, someday you're gonna forget people are watching.”

“Yup.”

“That would be bad. You got that, right?”

“Yee-up.”

“I'm gonna kick your ass someday.”

“Yup. I look forward to it.”

Shane growled, took a deep breath, and cranked up the car's MP3 player. Rush sang “Closer to the Heart” as they broke out of the woods and cruised onto the main road. The lake and green forest disappeared behind them, too quickly gone from the rear-view mirror.

They passed a ranger station along the way and stopped to report the dead body, but the small two-room shack was empty. Budget cuts had most of the park services on a shoestring.

Ahead lay an open road. The boys exceeded the speed limit, and their jeep ate up pavement like a hungry hippo. Sam closed his eyes and went to sleep, trying not to think about the gruesome scene back at the lake: the dead man and his neatly pressed blood-splattered tie.

A pain in his ear roused Sam back to life.

“Hey, wake up!” Shane said, flicking his brother’s ear.

“What?” Sam shook the sleep from his head and brushed the dirty blond hair from his eyes. “How long was I out?”

“A couple hours. We’re almost on the turnpike. We’ll be there soon. But hey... look.”

Sam looked around at the empty road.

“Yeah? Not much traffic.”

“Exactly. No other cars. The only car we passed in the last two hours was a breakdown left on the side of the road.”

Up ahead the Pennsylvania turnpike was deserted, except for half a dozen stalled cars parked in various skewed positions along the shoulders.

“Is that the turnpike? Jeez Louise.”

“Yeah. Where the hell is everybody?”

“Steelers game? I guess we’ll see people soon enough. Cheers if they win, riots and fire if they lose.”

“Funny. Hey, try to call the cops about the dead body. You should have a signal now.”

Sam dialed 9-1-1. The phone rang, but no one answered. “I’ll try again in town.”

They spun onto the ramp and entered the turnpike. At less than 20 mph, their jeep eased past the first parked car. The driver’s door was propped open; they glanced inside. No one. The car looked empty, but a stain of red was splashed across the seat. Shane sped up faster to put more road behind them. The sooner they got into the city, the sooner they could shower, relax, and report the suicide victim.

“You think it’s a curfew?” Sam offered. “I mean, like a virus, that SARS thing, or something like it?”

“Yeah, maybe, but why would everyone need to stay off the road? Earthquake warning? Tornado watch? What would keep people from coming out?”

“Terrorist attack? Remember how empty the streets were on September 11?”

“Not really. Anyway, it wasn’t this empty.”

“Beats me. Let’s get back home.” By home, he meant their grandparents’ house, before going back to the dorm.

Sam and Shane's parents had died two years earlier in a car accident. While on vacation in Colorado, touring the mountains by car, their brakes went out. They slid off the side of a steep road and into the canyon below. The car exploded on impact. There were no survivors.

After that, the boys moved in with their grandparents in Schaler Township before heading off to college. Grandpa's house was only twenty-five miles from school, but this year, they had opted for dorm life instead of living at home. As college students, they needed more freedom. And Sam needed a private room. Sometimes he generated an electric cloud when he slept. Not even their grandparents knew about that.

Sam wasn't normal. He had an unusual ability that, to his knowledge, no one else shared—the ability to generate electricity at will. He could contain it in a ball in his hand or throw it like lightning in any direction. His power could start a car, heat any object, or even light a room, if he was so inclined. And if he was careful to control it. It was a useful tool at times, but not always easy to manage in his young hands. He was far from a master of the spark, and much more inclined to suppress it than use it.

With a little tweaking, it could also be a weapon. That's what usually got him in trouble. He rarely hurt anyone, but an electric ball hurled at someone's chest wasn't about to go unnoticed. And secrecy about his ability was key to his happiness. He didn't want to be known as *the freak* again, not at the new school.

His older brother knew, but no one else did. Even his parents hadn't known about his ability, and certainly not Grandma or Grandpa. Shane alone knew about Sam's gift, and he carried the weight of that secret like a backpack of snow in summer. That was part of the reason for the annual camping trips. They both felt relaxed and comfortable in the woods and mountains. The pressures of life, school and classmates were far away. The birds didn't care if Sam started a campfire with his electric fingertips. There was no one out there to judge him.

Shane had always made an effort to help Sam keep his spark a secret. The two brothers would be roommates this year on campus. Normally, freshmen stayed in a separate dorm, but when your parents have died recently, universities are willing to bend the rules. It was bad publicity to create any extra hardship on grieving students. The faculty consented to everything the boys wanted, and they wanted to stay together.

Shane turned up the road toward Grandpa's house, still seeing no one alive, or at least awake, in the suburbs. Several driveways had cars parked in them, but no sign of people. Another abandoned car lay sprawled in the street, blocking their way home. Shane steered the jeep around it and rode up onto a neighbor's lawn. They crushed a small shrub to get back on the road, then turned up their grandparents' driveway.

"Try not to kill any cats or dogs," Sam scolded.

"Hey, I'm trying to get us home. And by the way, do you see any freaking cats or dogs? Or hear any?"

"I guess not."

The emptiness was more than the absence of people; they had seen no pets or wild animals, either. Except birds. They heard scores of birds chirping and squawking, and saw a few flutter around the trees in the yard next door. Nothing else stirred.

One page of a newspaper swirled across the lawn, and Sam bent down to catch it. He lifted and straightened the front page, half expecting to see a headline: *Evacuation of Pittsburgh*. But there was no such headline, only a report of a senator caught in a Russian bribery scandal. Same old news, with no hints about any catastrophe. Sam folded the page and stuffed it in the newspaper holder under the mailbox.

They peeked through the garage window. Grandpa's car was parked inside, same as always. They reached the front door to the house and found it unlocked. That wasn't so odd; sometimes Grandma just forgot. The boys crept single-file into the living room and listened for any signs of life. Several creaks lived in the floorboards and sounded especially loud today.

Shane called out. "Hey, Grandpa. Anyone home? It's Sam and Shane. Grandma?"

Sam grabbed his brother's elbow. "If Grandma's a zombie, you gotta stake her. I'm not doing it!"

"Stop joking around."

"I'm just saying..."

"Cut it out! Look, you check upstairs. I'll look down here."

"I'm not doing the basement, either!"

"Sam, go!" Shane ordered. "Look for any clues about where they are. Anything at all."

Like the floors, the old stairs creaked under Sam's feet. His sneakers felt heavy, and every step betrayed his rise to the top, with no chance of surprising anyone. Or anything.

The two upstairs bedrooms were perfectly kept, but vacant. The bathroom still had a few toiletries strewn around as if in the middle of being used. An open bottle of after-shave lay by the sink; he absently screwed the lid back on. He thought of *Psycho* as he pulled back the shower curtain. It revealed an assortment of soaps and a water bug that now dropped from the shower head and scurried along the edge of the wall.

Back downstairs, Shane hadn't found any answers or clues on the ground floor. A box of cereal had spilled on the table, which he started to clean it up. A cockroach crawled out of the box. Sam reached down and zapped it with a tiny shock from his finger. It fried and curled up dead.

"Did I scare you?" Sam asked.

"No. I could hear you on the stairs from a mile away."

"No one's upstairs."

"Yeah. This is freaky. Not like a video of dogs playing the piano. That's a different kind of freaky. This is more like, the body is buried in the backyard, freaky."

Sam pointed to the basement stairs. "You go down yet?"

"I was waiting for you."

The basement stairs sounded even worse than the steps leading upstairs. Under the weight of the two trespassers, each stair groaned as if about to give way. They stopped one step from the bottom and

looked around. Weak light shone in from two small window wells and cast delicate rays filled with dust particles all the way to the concrete floor.

Their attention was drawn to a strange mass packed into the far corner. It looked like a giant butterfly cocoon, roughly the size of a dog. Shane aimed his flashlight in its direction. The motionless cocoon shimmered between black, dark green and blue, depending on how the light hit it; shiny, silky, and creepy.

Sam stepped forward and nudged it with his foot, but there was no reaction.

“Weird, man. Looks like the neighbor’s dog.”

“Yeah, but I don’t wanna meet the spider mom who’s saving it for later. Let’s get outta here. I want to go check out campus.”

“Weird,” Sam repeated.

Sam’s intrepid spirit was waning; he just wanted to solve this mystery and get back to normal. He backed away, turned and climbed the stairs two at a time.

“I want to shower before we go.”

While Sam showered upstairs, Shane used the downstairs bathroom. He screamed the moment he stepped under the water. It was ice cold. There was no electricity or hot water.

Sam dressed and came back downstairs to find Shane eating cereal and putting on a new shirt. He was talking to himself, complaining about the cold shower.

“Oh sorry about that,” Sam said. “I heated mine up, you know...”

“Yeah. You couldn’t do that for me?”

“Actually... I don’t know how to do that for someone else. Unless I’m in there with—”

“No no. Never mind. I shower solo.”

“Good to know.”

Sam picked up the phone receiver. Grandma still had an old-fashioned wall-mounted phone, the beige ceramic kind usually only found in the suburbs of the 70s. He heard a dial tone and dialed 9-1-1. It rang; still no one answered.

“Nothing? Cops on holiday, too?” His brother talked while scooping handfuls of cereal into his mouth.

“Or too busy. Uh, is that the cockroach cereal?”

“I’m hungry.” Shane grabbed another handful. “Let’s go!”

“Hey, look, there’s a cat,” Sam pointed out the window. A gray cat stared back at them through the neighbor’s kitchen window. It was the first live mammal they had seen since leaving the woods. “You see? We’re not entirely alone.”

“You think the Willards are home?”

They crossed the lawn and knocked on the neighbor’s front door. When no one answered, Shane tried the door handle. It rattled in the frame, but was locked. He pounded harder and called out to Mr. Willard by name. Nothing but wind and birds replied.

“Should we at least see if the cat’s okay?” Sam asked.

“You mean break in? No way. Let’s go. We need to find someone who can help us.”

(End of excerpt 1)

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