

THE THING
YOU'RE
GOOD AT

Lesley Choyce

orca soundings

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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Chapter One

My father didn't mean to be so nasty to me. It wasn't his fault.

He would sometimes (often, well, almost always) have a bad day at the fish-and-chip place he worked at called the Fish Shack. Only he called it the Shit Shack. He'd worked there ever since I could remember. And hated every minute of it. But he was always afraid to quit.

So when he had a *really* bad day, when customers sent back their fish, when the boss chomped on him a little too hard, he didn't have to tell me. I knew. He'd bring home a six-pack of malt liquor, and between that and the look on his face, I knew the story of the day. I could even predict the future. Me getting cursed at, shouted at, told outright I was a worthless little piece of shit. That sort of thing.

But nothing physical. He wasn't like that.

I always made sure my little brother, Luke, was out of the way though. I called him my little brother because he was a year younger than me, but he was actually quite a bit bigger than me. He was fifteen and walked around most of the time looking like someone had just told him some bad news. That might have been because there had been a lot of bad news in our lives. I kept thinking that someday our luck was going to change.

Luke loved to watch old martial-arts movies with a headset on. And he studied books and instruction

videos he'd signed out of the library, closing the door to our bedroom to practice whenever he could. He wanted to be a professional wrestler or mixed martial arts fighter when he grew up, even though I didn't think he had an aggressive bone in his body. I'd never seen him in a fight. He'd been picked on plenty, but I'd never seen him stand up for himself.

Like I said, we were a family that had had a lot of bad luck.

"Our luck ain't gonna change, Jake," my father always said. "Nothing is gonna change. No way, no how."

That was after malt-liquor bottle number one. I'd just nod and try to keep my mouth shut. I used to try to change the subject. But that hardly ever worked.

"I'm sick and tired of smelling like fried fish," he would say. "No woman wants to be with a man who smells like old deep-fried seafood all the time."

I understood he missed the company of a woman. There was my mother once. A long while back.

But she left after Luke was born. She claimed that living with us was a dead end. “I’m gonna find myself some opportunity,” she said. And left. At least, that’s what I remember. There was probably more to it than that.

My older brother, Cole, was in jail and had a couple more years to go. Everyone had expected him to get busted for selling drugs. But that isn’t what happened. He was involved in a robbery of a gas station. How stupid is that? I was so angry at my brother for doing that. And I stayed angry at him. I refused to talk to him when my father called him up on the phone each month.

As my dad got a little more drunk, he would remind me of my destiny: “None of you boys are gonna turn out to be any better off than me. If there’s one thing I know, it’s that.”

It was always the same. Sometimes the words came out a little different, but after he said something along those lines, my dad would grit his teeth and

then look like he was about to hit me. Funny—he never did though.

I tried not to take it personally. I figured he had to unload on someone. I was usually the one nearby.

Afterward he would shake his head and look like he was going to cry. But he never did that either.

“I’m sorry, Jake,” he said each time. “I truly am. Will you forgive me?”

“Yes,” I said.

I always said yes.