

SOME KIND
OF COURAGE

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CHAPTER

1

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I reckoned it was the coldest, darkest hour of the night. That still hour just before dawn. Mama always called it the “angels and devils hour,” on account of how only angels or demons would have any work worth doing at a time like that. I didn’t know if I was doing the Lord’s work or the Devil’s, but I knew that it had to be done and the time had sure enough come to do it.

I’d been lying too many sleepless hours in my sorry straw-stuffed bed, waiting for the old man to finally fall dead asleep. My plan had been burning all night in my mind like the last glowing embers in the fireplace, keeping my heart awake. Truth be told, my hands were a bit shaky as I finally crept, as quiet as could be, across the cabin’s dirt floor toward where he lay snoring. And it weren’t just the cold making ’em shake, neither. But my heart was as steady as a true horse, heading toward home.

My leather bag was already thrown over my shoulder. I’d slipped it on without him seeing, before I’d curled up under my blanket. And my boots were still on my feet. He’d been too drunk to notice me not taking ’em off.

All I needed was the money. And the gun. And then to hit the trail running.

The money was piled on a shelf up on the wall by his bed. I licked my lips and crept closer, my feet finding a path in the barely lit darkness. I could see the barrel of the pistol, gleaming in the dim red light of the coals, on the crate

beneath the shelf. It was right within reach of the arm the old man had thrown across his face.

Barely breathing, I took the last few steps and reached up with my left hand. My fingers closed around the crumpled stack of dirty greenbacks, and with a smooth and silent motion I slipped them off the shelf. *It ain't stealing*, I told myself. *This money belongs to me, by all rights*. I ain't sure I convinced myself, and doubt chewed on my insides. But there weren't no choice.

I crouched and turned toward the pistol, but as I did my foot kicked an empty booze bottle. It spun in the shadows and rattled against another one with a loud *clink* that shattered the quiet of the cabin.

The old man's snoring stopped in mid-breath with a snort. His arm jerked up from his face, and two red eyes glared at me, confused but already angry. They narrowed when they saw the money clutched in my hand, and his top lip pulled back in a snarl.

"What're you doing, boy?" he asked in his high, piercing whine of a voice. Lord, how I had learned to hate that voice of his.

I froze, too scared to answer.

He blinked, his drunken brain no doubt starting to make sense of what was happening. He started to sit up, then stopped. We both looked at the gun at the same time. There was one tight, breathless moment when we both knew what we were gonna do.

Our bodies lunged and our hands struck like snakes. He was closer, but I was quicker, and when I stumbled back two steps the gun was gripped tight in my right hand.

It was his turn to freeze, and he did.

“What’re you doing, boy?” he asked again, but now his voice had a sure enough nervous tremble in it.

“You had no right to sell her,” I said. I was ashamed of how my voice quivered, not at all like a man’s. Not at all like my papa’s.

The old man grimaced like he’d just taken a suck on a fresh lemon.

“’Course I did, boy. She was *mine*. And I need the money to pay for all the food you eat.”

My underfed belly rumbled the truth to his lie, and I shook my head.

“No, sir. I work for my keep, and I work hard. And that horse was mine. You got this money by selling my horse, so it’s my money. And I’m gonna use it to get her back.” *And you wouldn’t be using this money for food, neither, but for more bottles of Dutch John’s brandy*, I wanted to say. But my mama had taught me better manners than that, and I held my tongue.

He slid his feet out of bed and sat up. I took another step back.

“Give me my money and git back in bed,” he said. “You ain’t never gonna shoot me.”

He started to stand up but stopped when I cocked the hammer of the gun back with a *click* that rang clear as a church bell on Sunday.

“I will,” I said. “I sure enough will, Mr. Grissom. I ain’t never shot a man, sir, and I hope I never do. But I’m gonna get my horse back. And if you try to stop me, I swear I will put a bullet in you.” My voice still had that scared-boy shake in it, but underneath the shake was a hardness that I know we both heard. An iron hardness that sounded an awful lot like the truth.

His eyes squinted uncertainly at me.

“Your pa left you in my care, boy, along with your horse and—”

“My papa didn’t have a choice. And I know he’d want me to go after her, no matter what.” I swallowed and hoped it was true. It was so hard to know.

“But that’s my gun! You can’t take my gun!” The high whine came back into his voice.

I shook my head again.

“No, sir. This was my papa’s gun. He taught me to shoot with it. He—” My voice caught in my throat, and I had to stop to swallow down the sadness that was always there, ready to rise up and choke me. “He’d want it to be mine. If something needs shooting, you’ve still got your rifle.”

I stuffed the money into my bag and backed up to the plank door. I opened it with my free hand, the gun still raised between us.

“You can’t take all that money, boy! It’s all I’ve got! I’ll starve!”

I knew it wasn’t true, but I paused there in that doorway. It’s sure enough hard sometimes to tell right from wrong. He’d gotten the money from selling my horse, and I knew I’d need it to buy her back. And I knew the money was more likely to go to liquor than biscuits. But I could feel my mama’s eyes on me, watching. And my papa’s. I wanted to do ’em proud, but right and wrong were lost in the dark of the cabin. I clenched my teeth. *A man’s only as good as he treats his enemies*, Papa had said.

My hand slid back into my bag and found the eight ten-dollar bills. I pulled one out and set it on the handle of the ax leaning by the door.

“There you go, sir. I’ll be going now. You won’t be seeing me again.”

I was mostly out the door when he whined his parting words.

“He’s long gone, you know! He’s at least twelve hours ahead, with you on foot and him riding. You’ll never catch him, boy.”

My teeth ground hard against each other. I lowered the gun and looked him straight in his stubbly face.

“I will, sir,” I said. “I will get her back.”

I let the door close behind me and without a look back I walked off as quick as I could through the darkness. The sky beyond the hills was just beginning to grow pale with the

coming day. The angels and the devils could all go to sleep now. But I sure enough hoped that one angel would stay up and keep by my side.

The grass and the stones and the dirt ruts of the road were covered in an icy white blanket of morning frost, and my boots crunched with each step.

I'm coming for you, sweet Sarah girl, I thought to myself. I would find her, and I would get her back. I knew I would. Or I'd sure enough die trying.