

THE SMELL OF LEATHER

Growing weary in the saddle, Jake Colbert figured he had about another hour before the sun would give up the light. Already, the distant barren trees were casting a last broken shadow to the day. The monotonous, dusty prairie trail narrowed to a worn path over a small mountain with steep walls that dropped into a deep canyon. Though he could feel his grip on the reins getting weaker, he didn't yet see any good place to bed down for the night. Rounding a blind corner on the path, he flinched at the sight of a big mountain lion coming from the opposite direction. Jake's horse stopped and reared up, but the mountain lion turned around and left them alone on the path.

The mountain air felt frigid to Jake as he continued along the path. Then the path opened wider into a little ravine with a tiny creek. Following the edge of the creek for a while, Jake soon discovered the tiny creek flowed into a larger whitewater stream. The cowboy always loved to stop along such a stream and just look and listen to the power of the water. With such admiration, though, came a healthy respect for the natural wonder. He urged

his horse to move forward very slowly. After a hundred yards or so of such slow motion, Jake pulled back on the reins for Smoke to stop. A broad expanse of flat rock now bordered the stream. Jake had to make a decision—get off Smoke and lead him across the rock or continue to ride over it very carefully. If he hadn't been so tired, he would have chosen the former. He chose the latter to let Smoke do the work, but he soon came to regret that decision. About ten yards in and the flat rock became slick from a thin film of spray that had turned to ice. Smoke's sturdy legs went sideways, and Jake fell off into the raging stream.

As if the cold water wasn't bad enough, the raging current bashed Jake into every exposed rock in its path. Every attempt to latch on to something—anything—failed. His right leg alternated between extreme pain and frigid numbness. He felt the fight leaving him as his mind began to accept the inevitable. Suddenly, something stopped his forward movement down the whitecapped stream. He felt himself being pulled sideways toward the calm bank.

He heard the words, "Not yet, my friend", but his mind could hardly process them. As powerful arms dragged him out of the water, he felt free—

no longer on a journey to certain death. One of the strangest things he noticed as he felt the hard ground beneath him was the strong smell of leather. He remembered that strong smell from the saddle shop that his dad often took him to so many years ago. This time it smelled so much sweeter, though.

Jake drifted in and out of consciousness that evening, but he seemed to always be aware of the warmth of the crackling fire that he lay nearby. His rescuer never said a word, but he faithfully tended to Jake's wounds throughout the night. When the morning came, the man hoisted Jake up onto Smoke and secured him in the saddle with some rope. As the man worked around him, Jake could still smell the strong aroma of the leather coat that the man wore. They left the campsite with Jake on his horse trailing behind the big man on his palomino. When the sun approached mid sky, the outline of a town appeared on the horizon.

Navareth boasted of two thousand citizens on the welcome sign just outside of town. It had two churches, two doctors, and four undertakers. Of course, such statistics meant nothing to Jake. Had he been more clear thinking at the time, perhaps they might have, especially the number of undertakers compared to doctors. Jake's mind still went

through periods of darkness where he wasn't quite sure of his surroundings. He didn't remember much of anything that transpired that afternoon. He woke up in a bed in the local boarding house with his right leg and both arms heavily bandaged. The scent of leather filled the room as he consciously took a breath. When the doc walked into the room to check on him, the smell of leather faded.

“Well, Mr. Colbert,” said the doc. “It appears you had a rough time of it, but I think you're going to be alright.”

“I'm glad to hear that, Doc,” managed Jake rather weakly.

“What happened?”

“Oh, I had a little run-in with some wild water, and the rocks got the best of me.”

“Ah,” said Doc Andrews. “I am a little surprised that you made it to my office. The only whitewater I know of around here is a good thirty miles away.”

“Yeah, if that man hadn't pulled me out of the water, I wouldn't be here.”

“Oh, what man is that?” asked Doc Andrews.

“That man that brought me here. You know ... that big man wearing leather and the wide brim ... he had a full red beard.”

“I didn’t see any man like that, Mr. Colbert,” replied the doc. “You say he pulled you out of the water?”

“Yeah. Now, I ain’t no lightweight, Doc, but he pulled me outta there like I was nothin. Then he built a fire and warmed me up. Bandaged up my arms and leg.”

“Well, he certainly seemed to know what he was doing. I couldn’t have done much better myself.”

“Then, come morning, he got me up on my horse and led me into town. He helped me up to the bench outside your office and said he was gonna take my horse to the livery.”

“Hmm ... well, you were certainly very lucky. I did hear someone knock on my door and when I came out, I found you on the bench. It seems improbable that you managed all that by yourself.”

“And you never saw or heard him, huh?”

“That I did not, Mr. Colbert.”

“Then ... how did you know my name, Doc?”

“Interesting question ... Billy Jackson, who runs the livery, came into my office and asked me if I had treated anyone lately that I didn’t know. When I told him about you, he guessed that the horse that was left at his place was yours. He never saw anybody leave it, so he got to wondering whose it was. Then he saw some blood on the saddle and so, he started looking through your saddlebags. He found the old Bible given to you by your mother, as well as some other papers with your name on them.”

“And nobody saw the man who brought me into town?”

“Not that I know of,” answered Doc Andrews.

“Let me ask you a question, Doc. Did you smell the strong scent of leather when you walked into this room?”

“Maybe a little, but there is so much leather in this town, it’s hard to say for sure. Well ... get some rest, and I will be back in two days.”

“Thanks, Doc.”

Two days later, Doc Andrews entered Jake's room.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Colbert?"

"Still a little sore, but I'm feeling much better."

"I'm going to take off your bandages and have a look."

"Let me ask you something, Doc."

"What's that?"

"Do you believe in angels?"

"I'm a man of science, Mr. Colbert. I take some accounts of supernatural forces with skepticism; however, I believe in God. Angels would fall in the realm of believability. I can't say I've ever seen an angel, but I've seen enough instances that science can't explain." Looking at his patient intently, he continued, "Now could an angel have a full red beard and appear in leather with a wide brim hat? I don't know. If it wasn't an angel and just a stranger ... well ... you should thank God for either one."

"Yeah, I guess so ... how do they look, Doc?"

“We can keep the bandages on the arms off. I want to keep the leg wrapped so you’ve got a little padding between the leg and the saddle ... so, you’re good to go, Mr. Colbert.”

“Thanks for everything you’ve done, Doc. I don’t rightly know how I’m going to pay you, though.”

“See Jason down at the desk when you check out. He’s got something of yours that we thought we should put in the safe. Then come see me and we’ll talk about it.”

“Okay, Doc.”

When Jake got down to the desk, he asked Jason for what was his in the safe. Jason went into the back room and came out with a new-looking leather bag.

“Here you go, Mr. Colbert,” said Jason.

Jake didn’t say anything. He just stared at the bag. He didn’t remember having a bag like that.

“Billy found it in your saddlebag along with your Bible, so we thought you’d want us to keep it safe.”

“Uh ... yeah. Thanks, Jason. I appreciate it.”

Jake tried not to look too surprised, but he couldn't help but wonder what was in the bag. He raised it up and untied the drawstring. When he opened it up, he saw a hundred or more gold coins, and he smelled the aromatic scent of leather.

Dumping some coins out onto the counter, he asked, "How much do I owe you for the room, Jason?"

Jason placed his finger on one coin and pulled it towards him. "This should cover it, Mr. Colbert."

Jake took six coins and put them in his pocket. The rest he put back in the bag and closed the drawstring. He nodded at Jason and walked out the door. He then headed over to the doc's office across the street. As he walked across the rutted dirt, he couldn't help but think, "There's only one way that bag could have got into my saddlebag."

He opened the door and saw Doc Andrews sitting behind his desk.

"I've come to settle up, Doc. How much do I owe you?"

"Did you get your valuables from Jason?"

Opening the bag, Jake poured out a few coins and asked again, "How much, Doc?"

“Two of those gold coins should cover everything.”

Jake gave him the coins and while cinching up the drawstring said, “Thanks again for everything, Doc ... I gotta tell you, though ...”

“What’s that, Mr. Colbert?”

“I gotta tell you ... I don’t ... never mind, Doc.”

“Stay safe, Mr. Colbert.”

Jake walked out the door and headed for the livery. He came to the sheriff on the boardwalk, talking to a woman with four kids by her side. Jake stepped off the boardwalk so he wouldn’t interfere with their conversation. When he got closer, he noticed the woman crying and overheard them talking.

“What am I going to do, Sheriff? I’ve got four kids, and the bank is going to take the farm. What am I going to do?”

“I don’t know, Lucy. If I had any money, I’d help you out. The bank has every right, though, to take the farm. You haven’t made a payment in six months.”

“I know. I know. Ever since Caleb died, I’ve only been able to feed the young’uns and nothing else.”

Jake kept on walking to the livery. He settled up with Billy and raised up the bag with the coins to put it into his saddlebag. As he was doing so, he smelled the powerful aroma of leather and paused with the bag half in his saddlebag. He then let it fall in the rest of the way and climbed up on his horse.

Heading out of town, he had to pass by the sheriff’s office, where he saw the sheriff still talking to the woman with the four kids. He pulled on the reins for Smoke to stop. Jake reached down into his saddlebag and pulled out the bag of coins. Then he pointed to the woman and tossed the bag to the sheriff. He urged Smoke on, and they rode out of town.