

Sarah's Brass Token
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Prologue

Banjo, Texas 1873

Sarah Jones twisted her heavy skirt between trembling fingers. She'd promised. She'd given her word.

“Damn you, John. You shouldn't have made me promise.”

Sarah walked slowly toward town, dragging one foot after the other. Pain squeezed her heart, making it difficult to breathe. Silent tears streamed down her cheeks, and salt stung her parched lips. In the distance, the jeering of the crowd crescendoed. She pictured her brother, John, all alone, fearful and hurting.

He'd made her promise not to come to town today. Sarah thought about her promise, then she thought about John's plight. He'd been her source of strength for so long, and now he was the one in need.

The murmurings of an excited crowd struck at her heart. She stopped walking, indecision rooting her to the spot.

A promise was a promise.

She pictured John as she'd last seen him, a dejected soul with no hope left. The image crushed her resolve. She could keep her promise to John and live with the guilt of knowing he would die alone, or she could give him his final ray of sunshine just before . . .

Grabbing a fistful of black broadcloth, Sarah yanked her skirts away from her feet and ran. The noonday sun beat down upon her body, and she panted because the humidity made it difficult to breathe. Dust swirled about, kicked up by slender legs that carried her forward at a reckless speed.

She came to an abrupt halt.

John. Oh God, John. What will I do without you?

Breathless from the exertion, Sarah pushed through the rim of spectators gathered on this momentous occasion. She squeezed her eyes shut then reopened them, her vision blurred by tears. Slowly, she focused on the scaffolding constructed in the center of the town square, next to the courthouse. The executioner placed the noose about her brother's hooded face. The crowd quieted, waiting for the moment when the trap door would release and John's neck would snap.

"John!" Sarah's tortured voice rang out in the silence, and John's hooded head jerked up at the sound. He had heard her. He knew she was there for him. He knew he wasn't alone. She'd broken her promise, but Sarah refused to feel guilty. Being here for John meant more than her hastily spoken words.

The trap door fell open, and the weight of John's body hastened his death. Sarah stood in frozen silence. Her brother's body jerked, a badly orchestrated puppet dance. The assembled crowd cheered. Hats flew about and grown men jumped in glee. The laughter of women washed over her, and she stumbled backwards, stunned by their heartless reaction to death.

"Happy now, Sarah?" Sally May Bradshaw stepped beside her, a smile plastered on her porcelain face.

Sarah didn't answer as she peered into Sally May's hateful features.

Sally May clenched her fists and leaned forward. "Your brother deserved to die for what he did to my Chris. Justice was done today. Now all that's left is for you and your brat to leave town. I don't think anyone can bear the thought of you living here anyway. It would only serve to remind them of John's crime."

Sarah met the sparkle of venom in Sally May's eyes with shock. How could she leave town? She had no funds, no resources available to her. The farm was all she had left of her family. Licking her dry lips, Sarah gazed out at the sea of faces that condemned her. With John no longer alive to blame, the community would turn to Sarah with their accusations. She was suddenly the one on trial, and they had already found her guilty.

The enormity of her situation settled upon her shoulders. She put a hand to her mouth, her stomach suddenly queasy. Sally May smiled, and a mask of satisfaction descended upon her pretty face. A man had died today, and yet, no one would grieve his death but Sarah and her son, Andy. Sally May's callous attitude left her empty inside. Her stomach churned again.

She turned on her heel and hurried from the scene. Her feet didn't take her far before her abdomen reacted to the day's events. She grabbed hold of a tree branch and leaned forward just in time to heave the contents of her stomach onto the ground., but since she'd had no appetite that morning, there was very little for her stomach to eject. Dry heaves left her weak and trembling. Grief left her numb.

“Here,” a quiet, male voice with a heavy Southern drawl said, and a dipper of water appeared in front of her. “Don’t drink, just rinse your mouth.”

Sarah accepted the offered liquid without glancing at its source. She hadn’t weathered the town’s condemnation too well, and she doubted she could handle pity any better.

“Miss Jones,” Sheriff Otis McEwen said from behind her. “Digger and I loaded the body for you. Wendler says you can pay him later for the use of the wagon, and Digger says you don’t owe him for the pine box. John paid for it ahead of time. Do you have a spot picked out for the burial?” The sheriff’s gruff voice held only a trace of concern.

Sarah nodded without looking up, not trusting herself to speak.

“Well, that’s good.” Otis said. “Reverend Truhart and his congregation won’t allow a murderer to be buried in the church cemetery.” He coughed, drawing her attention. “I don’t mean any disrespect, ma’am, but I think it might be best if’n you didn’t show yourself around town for a while. Leastways, until things die down a bit.”

Sarah straightened her shoulders and brushed at her wet cheeks. “Thank you for your concern, Sheriff. I’ll keep that in mind.”

A wagon rumbled into place beside her, and she turned to see Marcus Wendler hop down from the seat.

“There’s a shovel next to the casket,” Otis said. “I ‘spect you’ll be needing it. You can return the wagon tomorrow if you’d rather not come back into town. Better yet, I’ll send Billy out after it. I’d offer to help, but my services are needed here. There’s quite a crowd assembled. It’s been awhile since we had us a hangin’.”

“I appreciate your kindness,” Sarah replied, hoping her sarcasm wasn’t lost on either man.

Otis had the good grace to frown at her comment, and the stranger appeared quite disconcerted, but neither man offered any further assistance. Her back ridged with pride, Sarah climbed onto the wagon seat. With a soft cluck of her tongue and a snap of the reins, she urged the horse forward, but a hand reached out and reset the brake before the horse had taken more than one step. Her head whipped around to see who had stopped the vehicle.

“You can’t bury that casket by yourself, ma’am.” The stranger who’d offered her the cup of water gazed up at her with kind eyes. “You’ll need help.”

She bristled at his assumption. That he was probably right didn’t make her feel any more amicable toward him. At the moment, she wasn’t feeling too

friendly toward anyone. “I can manage just fine, thank you.”

He removed his hat. “Pride can be your worst enemy if you let it. My offer is an honest one. I know you don’t know me, and I reckon my shabby appearance doesn’t offer much in the way of reassurances, but I would like to help if you’ll allow it.”

Shabby was an understatement. His features were well-hidden behind a scruffy beard and mustache. Black hair hung unevenly against the soft butter color of his shirt. The gun hanging low on his hip contrasted with the warmth she read in his eyes, but she discerned no real threat as she peered at the man. Still, she felt uneasy in his company.

Her gaze swept over the thinning crowd, most of them making their way to the picnic set up on church grounds. Leave it to the town of Banjo to make a religious affair out of a hanging. She could expect no help from any of her acquaintances, and the man was right – she would need help with the casket. Digging the hole would be no problem, but she couldn’t envision herself lifting the box off the wagon and into the grave. At least John was already dressed in his Sunday finery. He’d been thoughtful in that respect.

She inclined her head to the stranger. “Suit yourself.”

He settled his weight next to her on the wagon seat and, without asking permission, removed the reins from her hands. She relinquished them without comment, grateful for his intervention. She glanced at the casket that rattled around in the back of the wagon and squeezed her eyes shut.

John was dead.

Until that moment, she hadn’t believed any of it real. The arrest, the trial, the verdict had all been a bad dream, but the reality of it was worse. John was dead. Silent tears streamed down her cheeks as grief overtook her.

“Want to talk about it?”

Sarah opened her eyes and looked at him, but the man kept his gaze centered on the rutted road. She studied his profile before turning her head toward the open lane.

“Thank you, but no,” she replied, wiping the tears from her eyes. Sniffing, she pointed eastward. “Pull off here. The family plots are just over that ridge.”

The man shrugged and did as she requested. He pulled on the reins and set the brake when the small cemetery came into view. Their arrival had startled a flock of crows, and the noisy birds scattered. Wooden grave markers stood unevenly in ground that provided a home for weeds and grass burrs. Only a few souls rested here.

“Wait and I’ll help you down.” The man offered his assistance.

Sarah refused his extended hand and hopped down from the wagon seat unassisted. Without waiting for him, she went to the back of the wagon and retrieved the shovel. After studying the area for a moment, she decided on a spot and pushed the blade of the shovel into the ground, discouraged to find that last week’s rains hadn’t made digging any easier. The ground proved hard, but she bent to the task. A strand of hair came loose from her braid, and she pushed it out of the way. After five shovelfuls of dirt landed on the ground, the man firmly set her aside and took the shovel.

“I can’t stand by and allow a lady to work so hard when I can do the job in half the time,” he said. “Go sit in the shade, ma’am. You look about ready to faint.” He didn’t wait to see if she complied with his command and started digging.

For a moment, she considered grabbing the shovel back. The strenuous work had given her an avenue in which to vent her anger and frustration. A bead of perspiration trickled between her breasts, adding to her discomfort. A sleepless night and lack of nourishment caused a light-headed feeling to settle over her. As much as she would have liked to prove to this stranger that she could do the chore herself, she gave in to the reality of the moment. On unsteady limbs, she made her way over to the wagon and leaned against its side railing.

Sarah watched him with a distracted expression, her mind preoccupied with other issues. How could these people hang an innocent man? Fortunately, Andy hadn’t been there to witness the gruesome spectacle. The boy was safe at Miss Woodpen’s home, safe from their neighbors’ callous behavior, safe from the horror of John’s execution, and protected from the grim reality of death.

“Done,” the man said, wiping the grime from his forehead with the back of his sleeve as he approached her slowly. “It’s a bit shallow, but the ground’s too hard to go deeper. You’ll have to help me lift the box down. Think you’re up for it?”

“Just tell me what I need to do.” Sarah preceded him to the back of the wagon.

The casket was heavier than she’d expected, but rope handles on either side of the wooden box made the task a little easier. Together, they wrestled with it and managed to lower it into the ground. As Sarah began to push clods of dirt over the top of the casket, a strong baritone voice broke into a rendition of “Amazing Grace.” The music washed over her soul with soothing intensity.

When the stranger finished singing, Sarah gazed at him with shimmering eyes. The corners of her mouth lifted in gratitude. Without thinking, she reached out and touched his hand. His eyes lifted to hers and, in that moment, she felt a

connection unlike any she'd known before. It was as if their souls touched, communicating on some primitive level.

She jerked back her hand and looked away. "I'll have to order a grave marker."

"A man likes to know he'll be remembered by those that loved him."
She scoffed. "That was his only crime--loving his family."

Only a month ago, John had made plans to take Andy and her to Ft. Worth to celebrate her birthday. There'd be no celebration this year.

"Do you need a ride back to town?" he asked. Was it her imagination, or was his voice huskier than before?

"No, I live about a mile down the road. I'll... I'll walk," she stammered, still dazed by her reaction to this stranger.

"I'll take the wagon back for you then, unless you want to take it back tomorrow." His voice sounded back to normal.

"No, you can take it now." She paused then added, "Thank you for helping me today. You were right. I wouldn't have been able to handle the casket on my own."

"My pleasure, ma'am."

He seemed reluctant to leave her. She didn't even know his name or why he'd even bothered to help. She should probably ask, but that might signify an interest on her part, and she didn't need the added complication. She turned to leave, knowing that if she stayed, she might be tempted to lean upon this man's strength.

Squaring her shoulders, Sarah began the mile walk to her home. Miss Woodpen would be bringing Andy home soon, and she needed to be there for him. It was just the two of them now. The sooner she resigned herself to this fact, the better equipped she'd be to handle the newest obstacle in her life.

"Ma'am!" The man's strong voice called out, and she turned. "Are you sure you'll be all right?"

No, I'm not sure. I need you to sing to me. I need your quiet strength. I need someone to take care of me. I need strong arms to hold me and tell me everything is going to be right with the world.

She wanted to shout all of these things, but she didn't. Instead she merely nodded, acknowledging his concern and dismissing him at the same time. He was just a stranger, a nameless body who'd extended a helping hand. His kindness

meant nothing more than the selfless act of a Good Samaritan. Knowing she would probably never see this man again, she put him from her mind.

She continued walking toward her home and an uncertain future, the stranger a fading memory she would forever associate with John's death.