

Excerpt from
The Good, the Bad and the Downright Sinful

Springville, Iowa

1871

Through the blinding wind ripping an icy cold through him, Holt “Axel” Ryder could barely make out the sliver of light coming through a single slat of a cabin window. Like a glinting star it gave hope. He turned catching the barrel of Boone’s rifle come over his left shoulder and move a few steps ahead of him until it shoved between Clayton Miles’ shoulder blades. The barrel nudged again in gesture to get moving. Axel drifted a wary look back at Boone mounted sure-footed on his horse while in order to steady Clayton, he grabbed his upper arm. Hands numbed and confined by shackles held him momentarily until better collected. Contrary to his worry for the kid, Axel immediately prodded Clayton to keep moving. It would be in both their interest to do so. He, for one, knew what would happen. He realized there was something more than their current circumstances of hunger and freezing in which they needed to worry. Plus, much like Clayton, he felt incapable of taking another step. As for the unrelenting cold, every intense shiver caused incisive, painful cramping to the fatiguing strength.

The thin, haggard overcoats, issued to prisoners prior to leaving any penitentiary in Iowa, was currently in the possession of Rufus Boone, a good ol’ boy and man of a few choice words, worthy of his character. He made it plain that holding the coats in promise would likely deter any thoughts of

fleeing, and rightfully so, since at the moment any irrationality was the farthest from either's mind. Axel, again, no differently than Clayton, merely sought shelter from the storm and following that, a blazing hearth to warm by.

The storm's front had come upon them much like a skittish jackrabbit eluding a half-starved coyote. Clayton Cottrell--his younger and a not-so-bright lad--knew as well as Axel, and had seen the predicting signs. Clayton warned the Boone in no uncertain terms; and any *soak*, Boone included in his lighter binge of drink that day, should've seen it coming. Being footsure and mouthy merely riled Boone all the more during his cantankerous stupors. Thus a kerchief was fixed around Clayton's mouth's figuring it would shut him up for a while until Boone could sober up and dissect what was admonished. Now, Boone was a day late and dollar short. Axel had known better than to advise Boone of anything--drunk or sober--since only hours earlier he'd experienced Boone's soused lack of tolerance on his hide. Too many years experience along with plenty years of anguish and shared bloodshed learned Axel his lessons well and that made him smart enough to shut up when told while Clayton being too naive, and too pudden-headed to understand it all.

Their shivering intensified as they continued toiling their steps through the mounting snow while Boone rode a fine gelding paid from hefty wages of any Federal Marshal. It was a job that many desired even with the probable dangers that came with it. Hands gloved with thick leather gripped the 'macate' reins with confidence while the biting cold of metal on his own wrists chafed and burned, hastening numbness all the way to the bone. Clayton slowed in front having a rough go of keeping up with Axels' more determined steps pressing behind. He couldn't let Clayton stop in that walk onward. If he did that would be the end to them both.

Axel wasn't intending on dying like this. Not in the cold, not frozen and buried knee-deep in snow because of some sniveling kid who couldn't handle the uttermost conditions. Axel had no doubt seen and survived worse conditions. He wasn't going to succumb and have it end like this. If he was going to die, he'd rather swing beneath a magnificent oak tree, ended by a taut noose from a carried-out vengeance which had now settled deep inside him. In his final breath, a warm breeze would blow similar to the gentle, consoling of a woman's soft fingertips gently brushing his cheek.

Too often, he'd seen it all in a dream as though he was standing there looking on and then by a silent, yet relentless reminder; sprung fully awakened. Moments tick by in utter terror and confusion, induced only by a backlash of his doings—drawn in by his own hatred and an insurrection and division caused by political upheaval and economic conditions. He'd force himself in a moment of supplication—lastly to be forgiven in that final moment since no one would likely shed a tear or pray for his soul in what he's done. But still, there was a hope when buried that it would be on a cheery, warm hillside with an overabundance of wildflowers, veiling in beauty to the ugliness of a life preceded. It was a life not worthy of rest alongside a once loving wife. Only then would Axel be able to rest without any kind of damnation from other folk, and worse himself.

His thoughts were broken when the front quarter of the Boone's horse lurched forward and forced him back several steps. He moved aside while taking a dazed look up at Boone as though his reactions were delayed and thoughts dispersed.

From the horse, Boone reached down in a swift yank of Clayton's shirt collar and jerked him backwards against Axel's chest. Responsively, Axel

caught the near topple that almost knocked them both back into the snow.

Clayton peered up through sagging eyelids.

Axel dismissed the pitiful sight of a kid, nearly too exhausted and beaten to even go on. As though sickened by the weakness, Axel's hands clutched Clayton's stiff, about frozen shirt and jerked him on his feet. Clayton winced when Axel proceeded to pull him up against him. He released a growl of disgust and a glower as though fed-up with his weaker spirit to go on while not being sure what to do with him next. He glimpsed up at the Marshal for a reaction or perhaps prompting with it. The pistol drew out of Boone's holster and the gun sight set in Axel's direction telling him exactly what to do. Stand down and do what was told.

Axel's delay from his slower thinking finally had him realizing the threat above and ducked with his arms over his face.

Instantly, Axel thrust Clayton back in a sort of wordless revolt to the unending burden of the younger kid and the deliberating notion of doing him in as being more humane than the future ordeal that only would bring torment. Clayton fell back along the snowy ground while Axel cursed at his thoughtless cruelty that was no different than Boone's. The horse's front legs stirred, rearing slightly causing Axel to move away as it neared Clayton still on the ground. Axel braced his hands against the rear quarter of Boone's horse just in case it acted out in temperament constituted by its thrashing front legs and high-pitched neigh.

"Get up. Clayton!" Boone commanded words that were barely audible through the relentless surging wind. "Keep it moving or I'll kill you and leave your dead carcass where you lie." The pistol aimed at Clayton sprawled along the snow before it flagged back to Axel who seemed to be unaffected and benumbed by the grim exchange. However as a

few moments ticked by, Axel bent over as if in some expected obligation and heaved Clayton back onto his feet.

With a lingering look at Boone and his high-fluent show in the saddle, Axel then steadied Clayton once more with a stalwart grip of his upper arm. The end of the Winchester shoved Axel's shoulder blade in a gesture to get Clayton moving again. Keeping both hands clutched together from the elements, Axel poked the edges of cold irons into Clayton's back to do so.

In laboring step, Clayton's hands bunched near his escaping breath and the kerchief aimed to shut him up. Axel knew Clayton's breathing had to be difficult and might easily kill him especially with his throat being slightly exposed. He swallowed feeling a comparable distress, and slight empathy, but appreciative in having the smarts to keep quiet when he did, so he too wasn't gagged in the same manner. Younger had its faults. Axel's rebellious and audacious nature was the hardest hurdle to leap over the years, especially after it was all he'd come to know. Now all he wanted to do was go home or be hung for the inevitable payback to the moments leading to this.

The cabin came closer into view. With hands tucked close to their bodies, both prisoners forged ahead with Boone's wary watch just over their shoulders. Their heads pressed down in an echoing and admonished murmurs of a resolve to just stay alive. Warmth would await them soon.

Subtle smoke from a chimney mingled with the fierce gusts of swirling wind. Around the cabin, they mixed and danced like deviled spirits in some sort of titillating coupling, but it wouldn't matter what evil was there...since all three of them knew of the only evil heading toward the cabin and inevitably it would destroy that one glimmer of hope.

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