

Stick to Your Guns Snippet 2

Sara wasn't sure what the time was. The moonlight streaming into the pretty guest room argued that it was still a time when most normal people were fast asleep; the sounds of movement outside her door suggested that there was someone else in the house who wasn't doing what normal people did. With Jillian and Bill staying in Dallas over night, it didn't take her much effort to recognise that the other insomniac was Nick, but whether she should leave him to pace alone or whether she should try to find out what was wrong, she wasn't sure.

It was the sound of the back door opening, then closing, that settled her course of action. Quietly, she climbed out of bed snagged her robe and padded out of the guest room and down the stairs. The brilliant moonlight helped her to navigate still unfamiliar hallways without incident until she reached the kitchen where Maisy was curled up in a basket beside the stove. On seeing Sara, the dog let a soft whine issue; a sad, forlorn sound that suggested to Sara that this wasn't exactly a rare occurrence.

"Guess he's been fooling everyone, huh?" Sara murmured.

Maisy gave another soft whine and settled her head back on her paws. In the moonlight, Sara thought she looked thoroughly dejected.

"Don't know whether I can help or not," she said, feeling slightly foolish for talking to the dog, "but I'm gonna try."

Maisy's tail twitched. Sara took it to mean she approved.

Crossing her fingers against the possibility that Nick had headed out from the house, Sara eased the door open and stepped out onto the back porch. Thanks to the earlier storm, the night had a freshly washed scent and she paused for a moment to inhale the clean air and enjoy it. Beyond the shelter of the veranda, the yard was lit up almost as clear as day by the moon. On the roof of the barn, she could just about make out the shape of Copernicus, back at his stargazing - apparently, Nick hadn't been kidding when he'd said the only time the cat came down was for his dinner.

She took a further step forwards and eased the door closed again, taking care not to let it bang lest she startle Nick, but a look along the veranda showed her that she needn't have worried. Nick had, indeed, headed out from the house. The bench swing was empty; so was his spot on the steps. Sara grimaced. Where would he go at this time of night? The horse barn was a possibility, but the echoing silence of a still night suggested he hadn't. The horses hadn't been disturbed. The hay barn was another option, but somehow, Sara couldn't picture that. The hay barn was a place of work; it wasn't somewhere to hide.

The bunk room.

Sara nodded. That would be it. She'd noted the recently slept-in bed and the familiar gym bag that morning. The question was, did she dare go wandering across the yard

at this time of night? She was dressed only in light pyjamas and a cotton robe with flimsy slippers on her feet - not exactly the gear best suited for nighttime adventures. On the other hand, something told her that this window of opportunity was rapidly slipping shut. If she left it until the morning, he would almost certainly dodge the question or give some sort of rehearsed answer - tell her what he thought she wanted to hear - but if she confronted him now she had a fighting chance of getting to the truth.

Sara shook her head as she stepped off the veranda and headed out across the grass. She was pretty sure she'd done dumber things than this, but just at that moment, she was hard pushed to think of what they were.

What had taken barely a minute in the daytime took nearly five under the moonlight, but Sara made it to the stable yard without incident. She paused there for a moment, just to double check that Nick wasn't out here, but the yard was empty and the horse barn door was barred from the outside. Bunk room it was, then. The level hardstand of the yard was much less treacherous than the grass and Sara quickly reached the door into the stable building. There she paused again. The hallway that led up to the bunk room was pitch black and, from what she recalled from that morning, it was a hallway neatly booby-trapped with piles of junk. She had to be insane for even considering it. The thin sliver of light glowing beneath the bunk room's door, however, suggested that she had to try.

With one hand against the wall and the other out in front of her, in the hopes of not blundering into anything, Sara began inching her way along the hallway. She managed perhaps a foot along the hallway before her toes crunched into something solid and immovable. She bit her lip against the yelp of pain and counted to ten slowly. It was official, she was completely insane for trying this. Wiggling her toes and judging them just badly bruised, she tried again, this time moving even slower. Another foot or so and her outstretched fingers alerted her to the presence of a stack of boxes, fortunately before she smacked abused toes into their base. Definitely insane. She slid around them and carried on. This time she managed nearly a full five feet before once more crunching her toes into something solid and, this time, all too movable. There was a loud screech as whatever it was slid across the cement floor and it provoked a muffled exclamation from within the bunk room. A moment later, the bunk room door opened and the hallway light came on.

"Sara what the hell are you doing?" Nick sounded a mix of concerned and angry, but thanks to the sudden influx of light, Sara couldn't judge which one was winning out.

"Don't suppose you'd believe I was out for a walk?" she offered hesitantly.

"I woke you." It wasn't a question.

"I was still awake." Sara opted to answer it anyway. Now she could see a little better, she could make out Nick's face; though it didn't help much in judging his mood. His expression was just a blank mask, shielding whatever his true feelings were.

"Why are you here, Sar?"

A multitude of possible answers cascaded through her mind. Only one seemed like it would be accepted. "Because you are."

The blank mask morphed into a bleak sort of smile, so unlike Nick's normal grin. "Am I? Or am I just hallucinating this and I'm really still in some plastic box under six feet of dirt? Hard to tell some days." He stepped aside. "Since you're here, you might as well c'mon in. You want cocoa?"

The question startled Sara and all she could do was stammer, "Uh, sure." And moments later, she found herself perched on the bed she'd spotted that morning, watching as Nick boiled milk in a billycan on a camping stove. "This seems...cosy," she offered.

"When I wake up screaming in the middle of the night, there's no-one here for me to disturb."

She noted the turn of phrase. "How bad is it? Really?"

"Some nights, I can go two, maybe three hours before I wake up. Some nights...less." He added the cocoa to the milk and started to stir carefully. "And then there's the nights when I don't sleep at all."

"What's tonight?" But Sara had her answer even before Nick confirmed it as her gaze fell on the stack of books and the sketch pad that had appeared beside the bed. This was one of the worst nights. "Why so bad tonight?"

His shoulders heaved in a shrug. "Probably to do with the storm and me being such an ass as to almost--"

"Don't go there," Sara cut in. "I'm fine." Her toes throbbed counterpoint to that statement. "Maybe a little sore, but nothing a hot shower and some Iceyhot won't fix."

"And your toes?" Nick asked, pouring the cocoa out into two tin mugs. "I figure the noise I heard was you taking a good punt at one of the boxes back there."

"It was and, okay, so they're a little more than sore, but no worse than the last time Greg dropped a lug wrench on them."

"He do that often?"

"Often enough."

"Here." Nick held out one of the mugs. "Not quite proper ranch cocoa, but it'll do."

Sara accepted the mug and wrapped chilled fingers around it, relishing the way the

warmth bled back into her hands. A moment later, and after making sure that the stove was properly extinguished, Nick took up a seat on the bed beside her though sitting sideways and staring straight ahead, as if he was afraid to face her. "Talk to me, Nick," she said softly. "What's really bothering you?"

"Sar, d'you believe in fate?"

She sipped the cocoa, which had an odd, metallic tang to it, and thought about it for a moment. "I guess. Maybe. A little."

"I didn't."

"And then your mom told you about Shorty," Sara guessed.

"I shouldn't be here, Sara."

"You think that because he died when he did, you should have done too? That's--"

"Bullshit. I know." He cocked his head to look at her, a wry smile twisting his mouth. "But I can't get around the fact that everything feels wrong. Like I don't belong any more." He turned away again. "I've tried to pick up and be who I was before, but he's gone and I'm stuck living his life."

The warmth of the cocoa did little to shift the chill that now settled around Sara's heart. "Nick--"

"I know. Give it time." The words were bitter and heavy with pent up anger. "It's only been six weeks since I got out of Desert Palm. I shouldn't expect everything to heal at the same rate the ant bites did-- You will stop me if I start repeatin' platitudes, right? Because I sure lose track of 'em. Not like any of them are exactly any help."

Sara winced. "I'm sorry. And you're right, platitudes do suck. But, sometimes, they're all we have, because, sometimes, what happened is something that no-one can really understand. Except you."

"And I don't understand it any better than anyone else."

Silence reigned for a while. Sara finished her cocoa and wondered what, if anything, she could say or do that would actually help. She was on the point of admitting to herself that there really wasn't anything that fit that bill when Nick suddenly said,

"I was so sure I was gonna die in that box."

"I think there were times when we all thought the same thing," said Sara softly. "That we'd let you down."

"You didn't, though." Nick's knuckles had turned white from gripping his mug too tightly. "And I knew you wouldn't. I knew you'd be doing everything you could to try

and find me and I knew I had to try and hang on and have hope, but it got so hard. Every second seemed to last like an hour and it didn't matter how hard I tried, as each second ticked by that hope just got thinner and thinner and it felt like I wasn't waiting to be found any more, I was just waiting to die." He swallowed. "I think I'm still waiting."

Sara nodded slowly. "You made peace with the idea of dying."

"Didn't have much choice to do otherwise."

"So I guess," said Sara hesitantly, "in a funny sort of a way, being rescued was a-- an anti-climax."

That garnered a sharp bark of surprised laughter. "I think that sounds even worse out loud than it did in my head."

Sara shrugged. "It's human nature, Nick. Taken to an extreme, sure, but that doesn't make it any less valid."

"Guess not."

"And it doesn't mean you wanted to die or that you were hoping to. It's just a-- a logical extension of the situation." Sara grimaced, aware she was beginning to sound like Grissom. "Nick, I don't know if you realise it, but what you did was incredibly brave."

"Or incredibly dumb," said Nick bitterly. "Brave would have been doin' what needed to be done and not being selfish."

"Since when is it selfish to want to live?"

"When it puts other people through the hell that I put you guys through."

Sara shook her head. "Nick, you didn't put us through anything. You didn't make this happen. Walter Gordon did."

"If I didn't make this happen then why the hell do I feel so goddamn guilty?" And his cocoa mug hit the opposite wall with a clatter and a splash of cocoa dregs.

Sara flinched from the sudden outburst. For a brief second, she was eight again, hearing her father yelling at her mother for the final time. Then moment passed and she realised that now Nick was staring at her with ill-disguised concern.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I didn't mean to yell at you I just--"

"It's a kind of survivor's guilt," said Sara. Now she was the one staring straight ahead. She didn't think she could say this and meet his gaze but it was, ironically, the one thing she could say that might just help. "You survive your version of hell and you

feel guilty for it because the way you survived means that other people got hurt. What you have to remember - what you have to try and focus on - is that coming out the other side of hell still breathing isn't the worst outcome and that the people around you, who got hurt along the way, they made their choices but you didn't. So no matter how you feel, you have to know that none of this is your fault. None of it."

"You're not talking hypothetically," said Nick.

"I was eight," Sara answered. "For years afterwards, I blamed myself. Told myself that if I had just been quieter or smarter or prettier then it wouldn't have happened. It took a DUI enforced counselling stint before I really accepted that it wasn't on me; that my parents both had choices that I didn't." She swallowed, aware her voice was starting to shake. "Same goes for you. Walter Gordon had a choice. We had a choice too - and though I know for a fact that none of us would have made a different choice, it doesn't take away the fact that we did have that choice. You didn't."

Tentative fingers brushed against her arm. "I'm sorry, Sar."

"Not your fault." Three words with so many levels of meaning. Sara risked meeting his gaze. "None of this is your fault."

There was just the faintest ghost of a smile on Nick's face.