



Shadows

Along the Creek

Rusty L Savage

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Fiction

by:

Rusty Savage

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Second Edition. January 2015

Dedicated with Love to all my siblings, my parents, my wife, my children and to all my extended family.

Chapter One

Kentucky—1894

The old farmhouse sat dim and still, lighted only by the flames flickering from the burning logs in the fireplace at the end of the long room where he sat. Moving shapes danced across the ceiling and floor, while the rest of the room was thick with night shadows. Soft darkness hid the opening down the hall to the back of the rambling house.

His mother stood across the room in front of the fireplace, head down, staring into the flames. She seemed pale, drawn around the eyes.

“You must be tired, Mother. It’s been a long day, perhaps you should go to bed, and try to rest.” Then it was her tone, rather than her words that made the boy brace his hands on his knees and stare more intently at his mother.

“Yes, it has been a long day and I am tired,” she said, as she moved slowly across the room and into the hallway. As she stepped into the deep shadows, she turned back toward her son. “You’d better go to bed soon, too. Tomorrow may be an even longer day for both of us.”

“I will, Mother.” Though, he sat alone in the dim, quiet room for a long time, trying to work things out in his mind, trying to find

answers, hoping beyond hope that he would come up with something, somehow. He had to have hope. Otherwise, he had nothing.

He made no move to light the kerosene lamp that sat on the table next to his chair. Swinging his gaze around, he peered through the wavy glass in the front door across from where he sat. He could just make out the shape of the black-bowed funeral wreath attached to the doorframe at the top of the glass.

He had a sinking feeling in the bottom of his stomach and felt his hand tremble against the side of his leg. He tried to stop shaking, but couldn't. Gripping his leg hard with his left hand, he stiffened his arm and rolled his shoulder, but the trembling didn't stop then, either. Taking in a deep breath, he tried to relax, and then turned his gaze back slowly, swallowing hard against the ache of grief and loss he felt inside.

He couldn't shake the feeling that his life had changed forever. It was a feeling of overwhelming anxiety, tightness in his chest, an unusual awareness of the beating of his heart, an intense and unpleasant sensitivity to touch, as if his nerve ends had crawled too close to the outer layer of skin. For the first time in his life, he was really scared.

His father, dead at fifty-six. He could hardly believe it, though, they had buried him that very morning. He had stood beside his mother while the men, in their black suits, lowered the plain pine box down into the cold wet ground. It rained all the while they stood at the gravesite and gusts of wind within the rain blew stinging droplets in his face, and down his coat collar, but he stood there,

unmoving, numbed by the loss. Once, when he raised his head, he saw other rain-wet mourners, spread in a wide, uneven circle around the grave opening, leaning on one another, weeping, sharing their loss and grief.

“... earth to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes...”

The minister’s coarse voice roared.

His mother’s body sagged against him, and he heard her moan, “No! He can’t be dead, he can’t be.”

“It’s all right, Mother. Lean on me, I’ll hold you.”

He held strong then, keeping his mother standing upright while the minister went on talking at the gravesite, and he had to hold strong now, as he sat in the darkening room, hearing his mother’s words ringing in his ears. He had to hold strong from now on; his mother had just started to depend on him. His father was gone and he wasn’t coming back, ever.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to relax. In the semidarkness, the smell of cherry-flavored pipe tobacco was pervasive, reaching out to envelop the entire room like the smell of boiling cabbage his mother often cooked because his father loved cabbage, while the boy hated it with a passion. That rich mingling of cheery and tobacco smell had always clung to his father’s clothes, to the soft felt of his hat and the waves of his coal-black hair. It had been a part of him, like his good-natured smile and unfailing devotion to his family. That fragrance also invaded the kitchen, the dining room and the bedrooms of the old house. Over the years, the smell had penetrated the fibers of the window curtains and rugs on the floor,

sneaked into closed drawers and age cracks of the hand-made furnishings, even penetrated the plaster on the walls and the wood of the floors. His mother loved the constant aroma of his father's old pipe. She had been lucky, she said, to have always had the reminder of fresh cherry blossoms in the house.

Cherry blossoms lined many of the flower baskets brought to his father's funeral by friends and neighbors he had known during his lifelong residency in the Solway community as a farmer and skilled cabinet and furniture maker. His father had built most of the cabinets and many of the items of beautiful furniture that were in the homes of the residents of Solway and surrounding communities in the area. All who were there showed their love and affection for his father at the Pleasant Grove Methodist Church, and again at the gravesite, as they laid his father to rest in the family cemetery on the old farm. Everyone had known and respected his father. Everyone.

The boy gave a slight shake of his head trying to dislodge the images passing through his mind. He wouldn't think of these things any more tonight. Raising himself up from where he sat, he stepped toward his bedroom.

As he moved across the room, he stopped in mid stride and turned to look toward a small doorway over by the fireplace, almost hidden in the shadows of the darkened room. Why not? He thought, as he walked slowly in that direction. His movements were certain in the semidarkness; the place was such a part of his life, had been since childhood, that he could find his way in complete darkness. He knew

the location of every piece of hand-made furniture that sat throughout this room and the rest of the house.

When he reached the doorway by the fireplace, he opened the small door and stepped through to the steep, narrow stairway that led up to the loft room above; his secret hide-away, where he had often played and slept as a small boy. He ascended the stairs and stopped to look around. The first thing he saw was the old straw mattress, outlined in the moonlight filtering through the window, still lying on the floor. Other odds and ends of things long since discarded were scattered about the small room. On the back of a chair sitting off in one corner hung a favorite shirt he outgrew long ago. He and Claude used the chair as the lockup when one was caught robbing a stage or otherwise engaged in some outlaw practice in the games they had played. The old grass rope still hung on the chair and on the floor next to the doorway where he stood was an old wood box containing childhood toys. Above the box, hung the tablet on which he had written his thoughts or things to do. All of these things brought back memories.

The little room was full of memories, good and bad; it had been a favorite place to play and to hideout when he was a small boy. It had been his escape room when things were not going right in his small world. He had often come here for privacy and to express his independence to the world.

Moving cautiously, he eased across the room and sank down onto the loose, straw-filled mattress. Stretching to full length, he placed his hands under the back of his head and breathed a soft

imprecation. Then, closing his eyes, he took a deep breath and tried to relax, but couldn't. Pensive, he opened his eyes and a frown of irritation pleated the skin between his dark brown eyes as he stared up at the ceiling where the rafters came together, making the peak of the roof.

As they had the past several days, painful questions reared up in his mind. Questions buried so deep, he could never voice them aloud to another soul, not even to his mother. Probably because he feared there were no answers. There were no answers now, either. He closed his eyes and settled his body in the loose mattress.

His name was Judson Ringo.

He was sixteen years old.

Chapter Two

Judson Ringo opened his eyes feeling as if he had closed them hours ago. The moon had slipped behind a cloud and provided small light through the dusty window at the end of the loft room. He raised himself, pushing up with his elbows, and then realized he had not been asleep at all, but had only dozed for a few minutes. He had been there in the loft room no more than ten or fifteen minutes.

He lay still, breathing gently in and out, testing. Yes, it was here too.

Here in this tiny room was the accumulated scents of dust and wood smoke, furniture polish, and cooked food, plus the dry pungent odor of leather, wool and cotton from the rooms below. Overlying all these, however, was the myriad scent of cherry-flavored tobacco from the rising smoke of his father's pipe, as though it still drifted in the damp stillness of the air.

It was possible, of course, that he was imagining things. It would not be too surprising; he had been through so much in the last few days and weeks that his reactions were somewhat less than normal.

Then again, perhaps he was not.

The corners of his mouth tightened with a grimace, and then he drew in a deep breath as he felt the prick of a sharp straw-stem pushing through the old mattress cover into his skin. He should have known it wouldn't be the same as when he was younger. He would be better off sleeping in a soft feather bed downstairs. He pushed himself

up onto his feet and sauntered out of the room and down the steps, silently making his way to his bedroom.

He reached the doorway at the end of the hallway, which led into his bedroom. As he stepped through, the cherry scent was even stronger. Strange, he thought, he had never noticed it before. *Why now?*

Taking that thought to bed, Judson lay still for a long time, eyes wide, thinking about the past, the present, and the future. Wondering what life held in store for him and where it would lead him. Unable to sleep, he threw the covers back and got softly out of bed. On tiptoe, he went to the small shelf and lit the kerosene lamp. The slightest sound was likely to bring his mother rushing from her room to see what was the matter. An old habit of hers, he didn't like. She apologized for it time after time. But she had done it for years. She listened for him when he was a child. And he was still her son. "Can I get you a glass of milk? Do you have enough cover, Son? Shall I read to you for a while? Oh, Judson, don't frown that way, I only want to help."

Carefully he eased back across the room toward the bed. The wood floor creaked with his weight. He held his breath, listening for movement in his mother's room across the hall. But nothing stirred in the house. No sound at all. He sat on the edge of the bed, and then lay back again, thinking.

Where's my life going? I have but one choice.

He tried to think of a way out. But his talent was poor. He struggled and struggled, and every time he came out with nothing. Sometimes it seemed he had no talent for anything.

He wanted to have talent though, and learning and knowledge. He had tried, too. But it was as if fate or something fought against him. After finishing eighth grade, he did everything he could to go on to high school but that didn't work out either. "It's just not to be," he murmured to himself.

From a small shelf next to his bed, he slid the world globe down and placed it in front of him. The globe was very special. Mr. Gabriel Chesney, Superintendent of Public Instructions for Hardin County, presented it to him when he graduated from eighth grade at the Pleasant Grove School. He received it for being the only student in the county to attend school the entire eight years without missing a single day. He was proud of that accomplishment.

Miss Cora, his eighth grade teacher, had called him up in front of the whole school that day and made a speech about how proud she was of him for being such a dedicated student. Then, the Superintendent made the presentation saying, "Anyone who completes eight years of school without missing a single day deserves special recognition and should receive something extra special." After accepting the globe, he shook the Superintendent's hand. It was the greatest moment in his life.

He turned the globe until the map of the United States was in front of him. Studying the map, he located the state of Kentucky and placed his finger on an area in the southwest corner of the state, about