

## The Brave by Cheryl Schleuss

Papà stepped through a sliver of moonlight and was gone. His words stayed behind, hanging over me in the bed. "Take care of our women, and Baby Oscar," he'd said. He did not tell me how. A pretend six-shooter he carved for my birthday, a kiss on the head, and those words were all Papà left me.

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A cloud of white flour burst from Mamà's hand when it struck my cheek. I blinked away the shock. Snowy powder floated from my eyelashes. "But Mamà..." She gripped my shoulders and shook my bones.

"Tomàs, what made you do such a thing? You are never to go near the dog fighting, or those men. How many times have I told you?"

Pasty tears stuck to my burning cheek. Mamà pulled me to her middle and pressed my face against the faded flowers on her dress. She smelled of sweat, and tortillas, and Baby Oscar's puke, and I hated her.

I left my tears on her dress and shoved her. A nine-year-old man of the house does not cry. "They say Papà is a coward like the others, that he left us to cross the border and will never come back."

Mamà was fighting her own tears, tears that drowned out the light in her eyes when Papà left.

"Respect your mother, Tomàs!" Grandmother swirled the wooden spoon over the sagging stove like a magic wand. If that was not enough, Great-Grandmother Cielo, clucked at me from

her small table in the corner. Cielo pounded dough with a knotted hand she could not straighten. Words got stuck in Cielo's throat after her stroke, but she still had the last say in the kitchen.

"Tomàs, you were told to go to the post office and come right home." Mamà was not listening to me.

I looked down before Mamà's sad face could steal my anger. "You shouldn't have sent him away," I said for the one-millionth time. Our women don't hear the bad things said about Papà in the village, the things my ears hear. The three of them hide behind the sheets that flap on the clothesline in our yard. They send me to the grocery store with the list, to the post office, to get the doctor when Baby Oscar or my little sister Gabby cannot breathe from the coughing.

Mamà knelt, rubbing my shoulders with "sorry" in her eyes. Her fingers brushed the hair from my face. "Tomàs, why can you not believe me? Your father did not leave us. I did not send him away. He has gone with the other men to find work, to make money that will move us far from here. He has done this to take you, and Gabby, and Baby Oscar away from the violence and crime. He dreams of a good school and a good life for you. I am sorry this is so hard for you, my little one, but you have to be brave. We all do."

It wasn't true. She made him go. Papà would never leave me if he had a choice. I say that over and over in my head at night when I start to hate Papà too. Sometimes I punch myself until the hate goes away.

"Tomàs, did you even go to the post office?"

Mamà does not care about Papà or me, or she would have noticed. My fingers rubbed the raised scratches on my side through the tear in my shirt. "Yes, ma'am, and before I even got up to the window, Señor Luìs said, 'Hurry Tomàs, I have a letter for your mother.' He handed me the letter and I ran out as fast as I could to bring it to you, but as I ran down the steps, the dog-

fighting man grabbed my arm and snatched it from my hand." I wiped my nose to breathe. "He took the letter and opened it. I followed him to the dog-fighting pit. I ran behind him yelling, 'give it back; it does not belong to you.' He stuffed the letter inside his shirt and said 'what are you going to do, tell your run-away father?' so I kicked him on the leg."

"Mother of God." Mamà whispered holding on to the table edge. She had not heard the worst yet.

"He grabbed the back of my pants and lifted me up." The words tumbled from my mouth as if I was still dangling in the air. "Then he said, 'you little mongrel, I should feed you to the dogs,' and he held me in front of a black dog on a chain who tried to eat me. When the slobbery teeth grabbed my shirt, the man jerked me back and dropped me on the ground." (I left out the screaming and crying). I pulled at the tear in my shirt and lifted it to show her the red marks across my brown skin.

"Heavenly Father," Grandmother cried. One hand flew to her mouth while the other made the sign of the cross with the spoon. She leaned over the pot and stirred but her shoulders heaved. At least *she* loved me.

"That filth, Diego." The pale mask covering Mamà's face turned red and angry. "And what did he do with the letter? Think, Tomàs. Did you see what he did with the letter?"

The marks on my side were stinging. Did she not hear that I almost died in the teeth of that devil dog? "He threw it in the dirt next to me, and I grabbed it and ran home. That's what I've been trying to tell you." I reached behind me and pulled the crumpled envelope from my underwear.

Mamà collapsed into a chair by the table, the envelope trembling in her hands. Papà's crooked handwriting stared up at us. She spread the pages out and pressed them down as if the

paper wanted to fly away, then she held her head in her hands and stared at the words. "It is from Isandro," she said. Who else would it be from? Everyone we knew lived in our village. "He has found a job working the fields and he is well." She covered her face with the dishtowel but her sobs leaked through the holes in the cloth.

Mamà's crying made Baby Oscar wail in his crib. I hurried to pick him up and bounce him. I dragged Gabby with me, hung to my shirt sucking her thumb, afraid to make her own noises.

"Isandro sent money," Mamà said from the kitchen. I stumbled with the little ones to the doorway, my heart racing. Was it enough money? Was Papà coming home?

"We are blessed by the Saints above," said Grandmother. "We are almost out of flour and medicine for the children." She laid the spoon down and crossed herself, one time for each of us.

"We are blessed by no one," Mamà said, with new lines of sadness drawn on her face. "There is no money in the envelope."

Grandmother waddled to the table like a fat duck after corn. She grabbed the envelope and the pages of the letter and shook them. She and Mamà lifted their heads and looked through the doorway at me.

"Tomàs, did anything fall from the envelope, did you see any money?" Mamà's eyes begged.

I shifted Baby Oscar on my hip and reached down the back of my pants to make sure Papà's money was not stuck to my behind. "No ma'am," I said.

"It was Diego," Mamà said, and her eyes fell from mine to the floor.

"There is nothing we can do," said Grandmother, shaking her head, the stove calling her back to the simmering pot.

"We are too poor to do nothing," Mamà said, measuring me and Gabby and the baby with her eyes. "I do not know where Isandro is. He cannot take such a risk to write it in his letter. There is no way to let him know what has happened." She stood and ripped her scarf from the peg by the door and swirled it around her shoulders like a cape. "Tomàs, come with me. We are going to the sheriff."

"No, Sofìa. You mustn't. You know what is out there." Grandmother's shrieking started Oscar wailing again and Gabby began to cry. "He is no real sheriff, he cannot help us. He is too afraid to do anything. You will bring trouble to our home." The noise in the room was bursting in my head.

Mamà grabbed Oscar from my arms and put him on Grandmother's hip. She took my hand in her trembling one and pulled me out the door. I shivered from the sudden quiet outside. I had not walked through the village with Mamà since Papà left. I should have brought my six-shooter to protect her. Mamà had been a prisoner like the other village women, locking themselves in their own house jails. She pulled her scarf over her head and I ran to keep up with her.

Mamà shoved me ahead, through the door of the sheriff's office. A desk, two chairs, and a long rifle on the wall chained with a pad lock crowded us into the tiny space. Sheriff Romberto (Mamà's second cousin) sprang from his rickety chair spilling coffee on the desk. He hurried past us, peered out the window, and then told Mamà to sit.

I leaned on Mamà's shoulder while she told him what happened to me, and the letter and the money. I waited to tell my own story. She was leaving out how sharp the dog's teeth were, how fast I ran all the way home. Sheriff Bert listened to Mamà, shaking his head as if what she

was telling him was not how the story should go. "There was no money," he said to her when she ran out of words.

Mamà stared at him as if he were a stranger she did not know, had not played with him in the streets when they were children. She pulled the pages of the letter out of her pocket and shoved them across his desk. "Read for yourself. Isandro would not write he put money in the letter if he did not. Why do you say this?"

"Sofia, go home. Stay inside until Isandro returns. Keep the children inside. It is too dangerous for you to be even here. I have too much trouble to handle as it is."

Mamà grabbed the letter off the desk and pulled me in front of the sheriff. "And feed these children how, Romberto?" His eyes would not look down at me.

Instead, he helped Mamà to her feet and whispered something that brought the tears back into her eyes. "You have to believe me, I'm doing all I am able," he said. The sheriff led Mamà to the door. When I spat on his black sheriff's boot, he looked down at me. I squeezed past Mamà and ran out the door into the dusty street.

"The sheriff is not going to help us, Mamà?"

We were hurrying, but not holding hands. Mamà was carrying her scarf. I had never seen her walk uncovered on the street. "No, Tomàs. We will take care of ourselves." Without my six-shooter and Mamà's touch, my hands didn't know what to do.

Mamà stopped at the houses of our neighbors whose men had gone away with Papà. "Wait for me out here, Tomàs, and do not wander." Sad crying went on inside one of the houses and angry voices shouted in another. I drew pictures in the dirt while I waited outside--skinny cowboys with six-shooters shooting bad guys. The tallest one was me.

"Mamà," I said, trying to keep up with her. "Who is the man of the house back there?"

"What do you mean, Tomàs?"

"In the houses where the fathers are gone and there are no boys left behind. Who is the man of the house to protect the women, like I do?"

She reached down and rubbed my hair. "I am the lucky one," she said. We stepped up on our porch together and I opened the door for her.

That night, Baby Oscar and Gabby breathed the angel's breaths in their sleep, and I shut my eyes when Mamà looked in on us. Mamà settled back in the kitchen and I slid out of bed and squatted by the door, to listen and peep through the crack.

"It is true," Mamà said to Grandmother and Cielo. "Diego is stealing the money our husbands are sending home. He is taking the letters right from the post office. Luìs is too afraid to speak out. Romberto says Diego will kill anyone who stands up to him. But, that is not the worst. Diego has paid a visit to Alma and ..." Mamà's voice dropped to a whisper and Grandmother gasped and made the sign of the cross in front of each of them. Cielo rocked back and forth, drooling like the crazy dog that tried to eat me.

"If only your father were alive," Grandmother said to Mamà, making Cielo howl into the open rafters of the kitchen. "Shush, shush, do not wake the children."

I stayed home from school, stuck inside with no errands to run. It was worse than being in the coop with the chickens. "It is time for you to start teaching letters to Gabby," Mamà said. "A good job for the man of the house." The fried corncakes grew thinner each day, and Mamà put us to bed as soon as evening shadows crossed the porch.

The lamp burned low and late in the kitchen and our women sat worrying around the table. I fell asleep to their humming voices. Some nights, other women visited and joined in the whispering.

One week after Mamà and I had gone to see the sheriff, a knock at the door jerked me from my sleep. Darkness filled every space inside the house except where the moon sent silver ghosts through the window. The knocking turned to pounding. Mamà's light footsteps crossed the floor. "Go away," she said to the door.

"Do not make me kick it open." The heavy voice pushed its way through the wood. I knew that voice, but I could not find its face in my head. A match sputtered as Grandmother lit the lamp. She and Mamà huddled in front of the stove. Grandmother wrapped the blanket from her bed around them both. Mamà shouted at the door, "Get away from this house."

A jolt to the door rattled the glass in the windows. Groaning and cursing rolled across the porch. Mamà rushed to our room and said, "Tomàs, you have to do something very brave. Put on your clothes... quick." I jumped up. My shivering arms could not find the armholes in my shirt. Mamà tugged my pants up and slid my shoes onto my feet. "Lock the bedroom door behind me, Tomàs. Then, climb out the window and run to Señora Alma and Señora Dulce, as fast as you are able, and tell them your mother said it is time, and they must hurry."

"In the dark?" With a loco man on our porch, she was sending me outside? I drew back searching her face for my real mother. Her eyes were wild like a pig tied for slaughter.

"You must go quickly, Tomàs. Be brave for us all. Knock hard on the doors. Shout to wake them. Then hurry back and stay with your sister and brother. Keep this door locked until I tell you. Do you understand?"

She did not wait for me to answer, and I did not understand. At the bedroom door, she looked over her shoulder. "Lock this door now, and go, Tomàs, go."

I slid the skinny hook onto the latch, but I needed to tell Mamà that even I could open it from the outside. I needed to tell Mamà that I was too small to be the man of the house. I needed to get back in my bed where once I was safe.

Pounding shook the front door again and I jumped in my skin. Gabby whimpered in her sleep. Baby Oscar sat up in his crib and looked at me with his tiny black eyes. There was no one to save them but me.

Blackness filled the space below the windowsill. I squeezed the grip of the six-shooter with white knuckles and jumped. The cold ground just two feet below surprised me and my teeth bit my tongue when I landed.

The front porch cast a shadow into the yard that swallowed up the moonlight in its path. The shadow moved like a giant moth around a lantern. Baby Oscar's cries reached the open window. The shadow froze then stretched to ten feet tall. I pointed the six-shooter and fired, then ran the other way into the darkness.

I banged on the door of Señorita Alma, afraid to shout like Mamà said; afraid of what might be behind, following me. When a voice called out inside the house, I heard myself crying out Mamà's message. Then my feet tore through the dirt to the next house.

I did not look to the porch when I got back to our bedroom window. I climbed like a spider into our room, and felt through the darkness for my bed. When my legs touched cold skin under the covers, I screamed. Gabby grabbed me with both hands and buried herself against me. With the covers over our heads, I held tight to my sister. Oscar was not making a sound.

Our women spoke in whispers as they shuffled and clinked things in the kitchen. Perhaps the trouble was over...I was so tired.

More fist pounding shook me through the covers. The kitchen fell quiet except for the measured steps of Mamà's feet to the front door. The lock turned and I bit down on the quilt. "Come in, before you break my door down," Mamà said, as calmly as if Padre Torres was here for Sunday dinner.

Heavy stumbling crossed the floor and a chair scraped on two legs, back from the kitchen table. "Well, Sofia, it seems you are ready to discuss business, no? I knew you were a smart woman." The voice brought a face with it this time. It was the bloated fish, Diego, the dog-fighting man. Why had she let him in our house? Had he come for me?

I pressed the quilt against my eyes but his face was already inside my eyelids, fat greasy lips laughing as he picked me up to dangle me in front of the slobbering dog. The stink under his flabby arms, worse than the dog's breath, burned inside my nose.

"You are drunk, Diego. Go home. You have no business here." Mamà's voice was no longer Sunday dinner. Why had she opened the door?

"Ah, Sofia. But, I have a delivery for you. I think this must be another letter from your run-away husband. Your husband who is not so careful. Sending money in the mail is not such a smart thing. There are thieves everywhere these days, no?"

"Filthy, dog." Grandmother said. "That belongs to us."

"Maybe, old woman, you need to go to bed. My business is not with a fat old woman like you. Or the old cripple behind you."

Cielo growled back at him.

"Why do you come here, Diego, and act proud to be a thief? We have nothing else for you to steal. My children are hungry. Just leave the letter and go," Mamà said.

"Noo, noo, you are mistaken." The words slid from his mouth, teasing Mamà with his keep-away game. "Here, have a drink with me." Liquid splashed into a glass and a bottle clinked on the table. Mamà said nothing.

"Fine, then I will drink by myself. I am no thief, Sofia. I have helped you by collecting the money your foolish husband sent in this letter, to keep it out of the hands of real thieves. It is here in my pocket. Come see for yourself. If you want it, you can have it. All you have to do is show some appreciation."

"I saw the appreciation you speak of on the bruised face and broken arm of another. You are an animal, Diego, worse than the dogs that you force to fight. You prey on the unprotected women of this village. You are no man. You are mistaken to have come here. I am telling you to leave, for your own good."

The fat man choked on his laughter, as if what Mamà said was the kind of joke the men tell at the cantina that makes them cough and spit out their drinks. Papà laughed like that at the cantina. I watched him from outside the window, wanting to be inside with him, slapping the other men on their backs. When the laughing in our kitchen stopped, the joking was over.

"I am out of Tequila and patience, Sofia. Why don't I get rid of these old women so they are not in our way? The cripple is of no use to anyone. If she were one of my dogs, I would have long ago ended her misery." The snarl came from deep in his throat and on the back of my eyelids tobacco drool dripped from his brown teeth.

A wail escaped Grandmother's chest, and Cielo shuffled her twisted feet to back away.

"You will not harm my family," Mamà said. "We will go outside, into the dark where I do not have to see your wretched face."

"I thought you would come to see things my way," he said.

The chair groaned as the stinking pig heaved himself up. Grandmother cried out to her saints. When the door closed behind Mamà, Grandmother stopped pleading with the saints and said, "Hurry," to Cielo.

"Mamà," Gabby whimpered, twisting my shirt in her tiny fists, digging them into my side. The fighting-dogs yelped and howled from their cages until the dead quiet, hiding under its black cape, crept through the village. I fought to keep my eyes wide open, gripping my six-shooter under the covers, protecting my sister and Baby Oscar. Where was Mamà?

Dreams swirled in the quiet as it drifted through the cracks in the walls, and into our bedroom. My bed floated down a river and I saw Papà. His head was cut-off and he was chasing it across the sand, down the riverbank. I cried "Papà, it is me, Tomàs," but he could not hear me without his head.

Gray light outlined the foot of the bed and the door. Gabby's sleeping breath touched my cheek in warm puffs. The pillow was wet between us. My heart was beating fast from the bad dream and I never wanted to fall asleep again. Voices floated into our room from the kitchen. I pushed the covers off and slid out of bed, careful to leave Gabby sleeping. I still had my clothes on from last night, even my shoes. I tiptoed over and looked in the crib for Baby Oscar. He was not there.

The latch was unhooked from the door. My feet pulled me toward it. Only one of my eyes was willing to peep through the crack. The kitchen was filled with light and Mamà, Grandmother, and Cielo at the table drinking coffee. Baby Oscar's round head nursed at Mamà's tit.

"Come here, little man," Mamà said. Mamà was warm and smelled purple like the lavender in her homemade soap. "Thank you, my brave boy." Baby Oscar grunted between us when I rubbed his head.

A hard knock on our door made me jump and cling to Mamà. Her nipple popped from the Baby Oscar's mouth and he squalled.

Grandmother swung the door open. No one but me seemed worried about who was on the other side.

Sheriff Romberto stepped into our kitchen. He took off his hat and stood looking at the inside of it, circling the brim with his fingers. "What happened last night, Sofia?"

"You are just in time for a cup of coffee, Bert." Mamà's voice was pleasant as she handed Baby Oscar to Grandmother and reached another coffee cup from the cupboard. Was she not still mad at him?

"I am looking for answers, not coffee," he said.

"Did something happen last night?" Mamà said.

I stood on my toes to whisper to her, remind her of what happened last night. Her fingers squeezed my cheeks. "Shush." I leaned against her legs. Why was Mamà not telling him? Was the whole night part of my bad dream?

Sheriff Romberto glanced down at me then at Mamà. Mamà patted my head. "Go back to bed, Tomàs, it is still early. You have not had enough sleep."

I went into my room and sat behind the door near the crack. Mamà didn't know I was never going to fall sleep again.

Mamà sat back at the table and picked up her cup. "I know nothing of last night sheriff. Why don't you tell us what happened?"

"Perhaps you should come see for yourself," the sheriff said. "Maybe it will help you remember." He was staring hard into Mamà's face. Grandmother and Cielo stared at the floor.

Mamà wrapped her shawl around her shoulders and left behind the sheriff. I ran to the window, slipped outside, and followed them. The sheriff and Mamà did not speak a word to each other. He led her to the grassy area by the village well. A hand full of villagers stood in a circle looking down at the ground. Mamà and the sheriff pushed into the circle and Mamà made the sign of the cross.

Legs and elbows fenced in the circle and I could not see through. I climbed the thorny limbs of the Mesquite tree, high enough to see over their heads. The dog-fighting man lay sprawled on the grass inside the circle, in his own circle of blood. His eyes stared at the clouds. Yellow fat bubbles lined the deep cut across his throat where his head tipped back. My stomach filled like a balloon with vomit. I slid behind the trunk of the tree and pressed my nose against the mesquite bark.

"Perhaps he was mauled by his dogs," Señor Luìs from the post office said. "Dogs can rip a man's throat. They almost ripped the throat of Sofia's boy." At the mention of me, I made a big swallow and looked around the tree.

Señora Alma was rubbing her broken arm. With a broken look on her face, she leaned over and spat on the dead man's bloody chest. I hoped Grandmother's saints would forgive her.

"That is enough," Sheriff Romberto said. "If no one here saw what happened, go home. All of you go home."

The circle stepped back, but no one left. The sheriff looked at Mamà. "Diego was stabbed at least twenty times and his throat was cut. And you say you know nothing?"

Mamà did not flinch.

"Maybe I should start searching house-by-house for a bloody knife," the sheriff said to Mamà. Then he looked around at the others. "I suspect there is more than one bloody knife in this village today."

The shawl dropped from Mamà's shoulders. "Now you want to be the upholder of justice, Sheriff Roberto?" she said to him. "You are a brave one to accuse innocent people who only ask to be safe in their homes, want their children to be safe in their schools. You are looking into the wrong faces. Why don't you go question Diego's dogs, as Luìs said?"

"Dead dogs do not maul a man," the sheriff said, staring hard into Mamà's eyes. I did not know what he meant.

Mamà's face did not change. "Are you accusing us of killing Diego's dogs as well? Who in this village would get close enough to those maddened animals to harm them?"

"They were fed poisoned meat," said the sheriff. "Every dog in every cage."

"And which of us do you think has meat on our table?" Mamà was looking up at the Sheriff, but from above Mamà was the one who stood taller. The sheriff looked away.

Mamà gathered her shawl and passed under the tree where I clung to its solid trunk, looking down on my life. A gust of wind tossed my hair and pushed the clouds past our village toward the mountains. The wind whispered to me through the bare branches, "...it will be cold tonight..."

"I will chop the wood," I said back to the wind. "It is a man's job."