

ONE BRAVE WOMAN. ONE STUBBORN TOWN. AND
THE GOD WHO REFUSED TO LET EITHER BREAK.

ANNIE:
True
AND
Brave

A NOVEL

JODY DAY

Annie True and Brave

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Dedication

Father God, I'm forever grateful. For Annie Riggs, a true pioneer who modeled strength, strong values and faith to a fledgling town in the wild West. Thank you

Andi Martin for first hiring me to work at the Fort years ago. Your enthusiasm for Fort Stockton's history caught fire in me and well, here we are. Thank you

Elva Valadez, Director of the Fort Stockton Public Library and former president and treasurer of the Fort

Stockton Historical Society, and Melba Montoya, former director of the Historic Fort and the Annie

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Annie. Critique Cafe, Fort Stockton Area Writers Group, thanks once again for your excellent support,

suggestions, and encouragement. As always, thank you to my husband Randy and my family for always supporting me.

What People are Saying

Annie True and Brave is an awe inspiring novel filled with historical figures and how their lives played a part in settling Fort Stockton. ~ Frances Gomez Armstrong.

Annie True and Brave is a wild ride. It paints a very clear and beautiful picture of the West Texas atmosphere and what life was like for the people of the time. In this book we get to experience Annie's life, which was harrowing, emotional, tragic, exciting, and full of surprises. Such an interesting and inspiring read! ~ Sarah Hamilton

CHAPTER 1

April 1901

The only thing standing between Annie Riggs's future, freedom, and most dire, her safety, was Barney Riggs. He stood before her red-faced, set-jawed, and gripping a can of coal oil. He stared her down, and Annie sensed he considered his next move. Whatever he decided could mean harm for Annie and her children. His whiskey-fueled rage always flashed like a desert brush fire, destroying everything in its path until it hit dirt, where there was nothing left to burn. His usual subsequent repentance in the proverbial dust and ashes, and often on his knees, would not work this time, *if* she lived through this latest aggression. She steeled herself, the coal oil fumes bringing on dizziness.

Only ten years old, Junior huddled in the corner with his younger siblings. Errol, Mavis, and baby Gene clutched at his shirt and sobbed.

"Papa, please," Junior cried.

Barney jerked his head toward his son, and Annie's heart lurched.

Junior fished in his pants pocket and pulled out a rock. His knuckles went white as he gripped the rock

in his fist. "Please, Pa, don't."

Barney took a step toward his children, and Junior took a step toward his father.

Errol picked up baby Gene and grabbed Mavis' hand. Their cries tore at Annie.

Junior held the rock up as if to throw it.

Barney's jaw went slack, and his blue eyes glazed over. Was he having a stroke? He dropped the coal oil can and the putrid liquid streamed a path across the cabin floor. He turned toward the bedroom door. Giving up? Or reaching for his rifle that leaned against the wall?

She couldn't risk it. As soon as he was fully turned away, she took the most important deep breath of her life and shouted, "Run!"

~*~

The next day...

Annie made up her mind. She tried to focus on Doña Piña's small spare room. The old sutlery with its thick, adobe walls kept the room cool, and the crazy quilt that hung on the window shielded Annie from the morning sun. She tried to focus on the way the feather mattress and heavy quilts cocooned her. Safe for the moment, she should have been able to sleep, but even after bathing, coal oil from her hair stung her nose and made her eyes water.

The scratches on her legs throbbed, so she couldn't block out the flight through the desert the night before. There hadn't been time to grab a shawl or wrap, or

anything to start a fire. She and the children spent the night huddled against a pile of rocks. The little ones, wrapped up in her skirts, jolted awake with the whine and bark of the coyotes. Annie shushed them back to sleep, stroking their damp foreheads. She thought about how Pa would once more tell her, "I told you not to marry him."

As a child, she'd loved the desert night song, the rhythm of the crickets, and the howl of coyotes and wolves. Pa had moved them to Fort Stockton when she was only eight. They'd slept in a tent then. She'd lie awake and listen to the constant roar of the wind. It never frightened her.

But last night, the longest night of her life, the fear had constricted her throat. The darkness had hidden her silent grief from the children. She'd wept for the dreams broken once more. By the time the sun peeped over the eastern mesa, she'd set her mind on what would come next.

Never again. Her heart broke once more as she recalled how Junior had held up a rock in threat to his father, tears streaming down his face. Annie Riggs would never run again. She'd lifted her head and walked straight as a rod out of the desert the next morning.

They'd stumbled into town at dawn. Annie hadn't seen any flames in the darkness, so her house, or rather, Barney's house, must still be standing. What did it matter? He'd destroyed most of the furniture anyway. Whatever remained would reek of coal oil. She'd never step foot inside that house again. His horse

was tied to the rail as they passed the saloon. Had Barney slept it off in the back room?

The children had clung to her skirts and whimpered when they saw their father's horse. She had no fear of confronting him. He knew her well enough to know that what he'd done last night would end it, once and for all. She'd knocked on Doña Matilde Piña's door.

The woman took one look at the bedraggled troop and spun into action. She put the kettle on, and then fed the children and put them to bed. She heated more water for a bath and gave Annie some privacy. Doña Matilde came in later and gathered buckets. She'd rinsed Annie's hair three times, but the scent of coal oil lingered.

"Pobre cosa, miija, you must sleep," the old woman said as she lay a fresh nightgown on the chair beside the tub. "No work today. No, you sleep. I will speak to Mr. Kettler." She clucked more endearments in broken English and crossed herself as she tucked Annie in like a child.

Sleep. If only she could. In a few hours she would send for fresh clothes from the house so she could see her father this afternoon. Surely his position as Pecos County Judge could expedite things. She counted her assets for a fresh start – her faith, good, strong children, and a job at the Kettler Hotel. She let that thought comfort her. But despite her resolve, she pulled the spare pillow into her arms and wept.

~*~

A Year Later ~ April 8, 1902

Annie pounded the dough into shape. If she didn't stop manhandling it, the biscuits would be hard as rocks. She punched her fist into the wooden bowl one more time and then watched the imprint of her knuckles spread and disappear. She lifted the dough and threw it down on the floured kitchen table. A puff of flour misted the air as she began to roll it out.

"Something wrong, Mrs. Riggs?" Abel Martin stood in the kitchen door, both arms loaded with packages from Kettler's store. He blew blond bangs out of his face.

"Just put the packages on the end of the table there." How had she not heard him come in?

Abel unloaded the groceries on the end of the table. "Mr. Riggs is kicking up a ruckus at the saloon. Heard him hollerin' as I passed."

She slammed the rolling pin down on the table. "Hasn't your mama taught you to mind your own business?"

The blood drained from Abel's ruddy face. He blew his bangs up again, revealing wide, frightened blue eyes. He headed for the door.

What's the matter with me? "Wait, Abel." She stepped across the kitchen and took two cookies from the glass jar by the stove.

Abel stood by the door, frozen.

Annie walked over to him and picked up one stiff arm, opened his fingers and placed the cookies in his palm. She then took a penny from her apron and

tucked it in his tattered shirt pocket. She grasped both his shoulders and looked into his eyes. "You stay away from that saloon, you hear me?"

He relaxed and took a bite of cookie. "Yes, ma'am. You and Mama agree on that."

"You listen to your mama, then." Annie turned the boy around and nudged him toward the door. If Susanna Martin didn't do it soon, Annie might as well tie that boy to a chair and cut off those long blond curls. At thirteen, he was pretty nearly a man. Susanna seemed to fall ill often these days. Annie worried a bit about her having a new baby in such a frail condition, and her husband recently cold in the grave. Maybe she just didn't have time or energy to worry over Abel's hair. The poor boy had been run ragged since his pa died.

She followed him to the front door and closed it behind him, glancing through the lace door curtain at the saloon across the street. Just a few horses tied to the rail, but not Barney's. But then, he hadn't been getting around very well lately.

He used a cane the last time she'd seen him. Who would take care of him if his health declined? He'd taken that out of her hands. Some, especially his best friend, Charlie Simmons, said she'd left him all alone. It's not as if she wanted to divorce him, but a woman's mind, body, and heart, could only take so much. He'd taken all but her spirit, and that nearly broken.

He made it hard for her to enjoy her freedom. He wouldn't leave things alone. Why couldn't he just agree to the terms and let them all get on with their

lives? Eleven children between them, and her heart still connected to his. Would it ever be over?

The clock on the foyer wall showed nearly noon. Her steps turned toward the kitchen. Time to finish cutting those biscuits and get lunch ready for the school children. Thank heaven the ranchers paid her to feed their children during the week. Every little bit of extra work she could get added to her salary as manager of the Kettler Hotel. She couldn't get a dime from Barney until he agreed to the financial terms of their divorce.

"Annie!"

Oh, no, that sounds like Barney. What now?

"Annie girl, come and look!"

She made her way back to the front and stepped out the door.

Barney sat on his buckboard, reins in hand. He kept yelling for her.

Of all things! A rotting bovine carcass sprawled in the wagon, flies buzzing around.

"What in the world are you doing, Barney Riggs?" The smell from the carcass turned her stomach.

"Look, Annie girl, I finally got someone to ride with me!"

The crowd that had gathered outside the Grey Mule Saloon across the street snickered and pointed.

Annie turned, flew back into the hotel, and slammed the door. This was her punishment for refusing to go for a ride with him to discuss a reconciliation. His repeated requests wore her down, but her mind was made up. Never again. She peeked

out the curtains once again.

He drove down the road toward Rooney Park. He talked to himself, spewing expletives no doubt.

Annie sighed and willed her tears to stay at bay. *I've got work to do.* She returned to the kitchen and looked out the window.

Callie Smith sat in the backyard; rough, black hands folded in her lap. Thin and gaunt, Callie waited for Monday's laundry, her mahogany eyes staring toward the north, the direction her Lucius rode the last time she saw him. She'd been a laundress for the Fort when she and Lucius had "jumped the broom" on the Fort grounds. Annie attended the ceremony, to the shocked sentiment of the officers' wives. When the Fort disbanded and prepared to ride out, Callie was pregnant and nearing her time. Lucius promised to come for her. He never did. Annie could sometimes get Callie to come into the hotel for a cup of tea, but rarely.

Annie continued to cut the dough and put the rounds in the oven, then set to slicing ham. Her thoughts went to poor Beau. Her oldest daughter, Maddie, had a real gem of a husband in Beau Chadwick. He'd taken over as executor of the divorce settlement, and Barney was giving him a murderous time. Beau had even petitioned the court to be relieved. Annie didn't blame him, but what would she do without help? Just the day before Beau had tried to talk to Barney, but was rewarded with several blows of his cane. She'd just have to pray harder for a resolution to the situation and not rant at innocent errand boys.

The bell on the front door dinged, and she

expected to hear the shuffling of children's feet, and the scraping of chairs at the dining room table. She didn't hear anything, but maybe it was a guest wanting a bed. She walked through the kitchen and dining room to the front foyer, brushing flour from her hands against her apron. "Maddie!" Annie called to her daughter who stood leaning on the counter, her hat disheveled. Maddie's hand clutched at her waist, and she gasped for breath.

"What's the matter?" Annie put her arm around Maddie, led her to the dining room table, and then helped her sit in the end chair.

"Mama," was all Maddie could manage. She began to cry.

"What's happened, are you all right? Beau, the children?" Annie held Maddie's face in her hands.

"Mama," Maddie gasped. "Beau shot Barney. It's...it's bad."

A black flash rolled across Annie's brain. She lost her balance and sank to her knees in front of her daughter. Her head dropped into Maddie's lap.

"Mama, are you all right? Mama!" Maddie shook Annie's shoulders.

"Is he?" Annie managed to whisper.

"No, but he took five in the chest. It's bad, Mama."

Boots stepped across the floor, but Annie couldn't raise her head. Large hands cupped her elbows and helped her to her feet. She looked into Beau's face. His mouth moved, but she couldn't hear anything. "What, what did you say?"

"Mother, he reached for his gun, well, I thought it

was his gun. I had to shoot him. I'm sorry, but it couldn't be helped. You know he draws at anyone and anything. I really thought he'd shoot me." Beau hung his head.

Her knees buckled, but Beau kept her from falling. The sound of the bell, boots, and voices began to fill the hotel. Annie found her legs, and her voice. "Bring him here."

The next half hour blurred into a tunnel of activity. Annie fought dizzy blackness to give directions. "Maddie, boil water. Beau, you better get the sheriff, somebody pull the covers off the bed in the north corner room." No use calling for a doctor. There hadn't been a regular medical man since the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry left Fort Stockton in eighty-seven.

Her son, Thad, and Barney's friend, Charlie Simmons, carried him in. She pushed down a scream, and with her hand over her mouth, she led them to the room. Barney was covered in blood and gasped for breath.

They laid him on the bed. Barney writhed in pain. He opened his eyes and looked at Annie. For the first time since she'd known him, she saw fear in his eyes. She stood frozen in the doorway.

"I'll undress him, Mama." Thad stepped toward his step-father on the bed.

"No, you go with Beau to the sheriff. I take it you saw it happen?" She steadied herself with one hand on the door frame.

"Yes, ma'am, a lot of people did," Thad said, stepping aside. "Barney did reach, but he had no gun.

It was his cane."

"I'll go too, and tell what really happened," Charlie seethed. He rushed out of the room, his boots stomped through the hotel, the bell dinged, and then the door slammed. It seemed to play out in slow motion. She couldn't focus.

"It was Barney reached first, Mama. Beau didn't have a choice, especially after the way Barney's been threatening to shoot him," Thad said.

Annie nodded. "Get on with you, now."

Thad turned back toward his stepfather and knelt beside him. He took Barney's hand.

"Good man," Barney whispered and then groaned.

Thad cleared his throat, squeezed Barney's hand, and then turned to Annie. "I'll send my Sarah to come and help."

Annie braced herself with both arms in the door frame. She swallowed a sob and took a deep breath. She felt hands on her shoulders.

"I'm so sorry, Mama." Maddie turned Annie around and embraced her.

Annie leaned into her daughter's embrace, and then pushed away. *No. I can't let go. Not yet.* "Please take those biscuits out of the oven, and when Sarah gets here tell her to take them and that ham I was slicing over to the school. I can't have those children in here today. Bring me a pan of hot water, and some rags."

Maddie nodded, and left Annie alone.

Annie pressed her lips together and willed steel into her mind, then walked into the room. "Well, you

really did it this time." She knelt and began tearing at his shirt.

"I," he began, but fell into a fit of coughing, blood spattering his mouth. He finally nodded.

It took some doing, and he hollered the whole time, but she got his shirt and his belt off.

Maddie brought in the water and rags but left.

Barney quieted a little as she dabbed at his wounds with the warm cloths. Had Beau missed his heart? Still, he looked to be bleeding out. She cleaned him up as best she could, tried to apply pressure, and wrapped his chest good and tight.

"Send for the priest, Annie," Barney whispered.

"There's not a priest in town now, Barney."

She'd been secretly glad there'd not been a regular priest available to pass judgment on two divorces, but now she'd give anything for a Father to say Last Rites. Barney had never done anything but laugh at her for praying the Rosary. Then again, she'd never known him to be afraid before. Could the weight of killing seven men finally be bothering him?

"He never kilt nobody but that didn't need killin'," Charlie was fond of saying. Barney could do no wrong in his eyes since he'd saved Charlie's life.

"Annie, take it down." Barney labored over every word.

Annie knew what he meant. She reached up, pulled the pins from her hair, and let it fall across her shoulders. She held his hand and leaned close to him.

"Molasses," he said, and tried to stroke her hair, wincing with every motion.

"Barney," she said, and let the tears come.

He took a deep breath, well, as deep as he could, and tried to sit up.

"No. Lie still. It'll be better that way. Please, Barney," she said.

"Annie, I don't want to die like this. It's about to overtake me. The pain."

She pulled his hand to her cheek, bathing it in her tears. The one thing that caused Barney the most trouble was the only thing that could help him physically now. Would he call on the only thing that could help his death?

"Maddie," she called.

She must have been hovering near for she answered almost immediately, "Yes, ma'am?"

"See if there's a bottle of whiskey in the room where that cowboy is staying. They know they're not supposed to bring it in the hotel, but they do it anyway."

"All right." A few minutes later she returned with a half-full bottle of whiskey.

Annie held his head up a bit and tried to give him a drink.

He could only sip a bit at a time, not nearly enough to help with the pain. It only caused a fit of coughing and his breathing became more labored. "I just want peace, Annie, do you still have it?"

She reached into her pocket and felt the cold steel.

CHAPTER 2

Annie walked toward the kitchen the next morning, bent on starting breakfast. Horses stampeded in her head, and her heart felt squeezed like a dirty dish rag. Her family filled the dining room. Baby Gene toddled out of Maddie's arms and wrapped his arms around her knees. She picked him up and he nuzzled his face into her neck. *Poor thing, he doesn't understand what's happened.* Mavis clung to her Uncle Thad, crying with little gasps of breath that broke Annie's heart anew. Mavis loved her father, but often said in her five-year-old lisp, "He scare me, Mama." Junior stood next to Thad with his lips in a grim line. Her son could not fool anyone, for his red eyes told the story.

"Mother, I sent a telegram to Liza Mae," Thad said. Her third child, Liza Mae in San Angelo was not well, and Annie hurt worse knowing her daughter would likely not be able to come. "I'll drive out to the ranch and bring Jack and the girls home."

Jack, born after Liza Mae and only twenty, did not like Barney much. They'd argued many times over Barney's treatment of Annie. He spent as much time away from Fort Stockton as he could, helping the judge on the ranch. He'd taken his teen sisters, Evelyn and Myra with him. Her children from her first marriage,

even though they sometimes didn't care for their stepfather, would rally around her. Thad, her oldest son, was the exception. He seemed to get along with Barney quite well.

"Mother, you do not have to make biscuits today. Aunt Mary and I can handle this. They won't be as good as yours, of course, but please, you need your rest." Maddie took off her crocheted shawl and wrapped it around Annie's shoulders.

Gratitude filled her heart to see that Maddie, and Annie's younger sister Mary, had breakfast well underway. A shooting would not stop the daily operations of any business. They were common occurrences in Fort Stockton. This event did cause a sensation because it was the famous, or rather infamous, Barney Riggs. Still, hotel guests would be wanting their breakfast. Things galloped on as usual, while her heart nearly burst with pain. If she didn't find some work to do, she'd go crazy. She looked around the room at her loving family so willing to be there for her, but suddenly felt very alone. The future of this family was now on her shoulders, hers alone. The weight of it made her arms and legs feel very weak, and too heavy to bear. She put Gene down on the floor.

"Come on fella," Thad said, picking Gene up. "Let's go feed the horses." He took Mavis by the hand, and nodded toward Junior to come along.

They went to the front door in the foyer. Junior stood facing her, his features contorted. Tears sprang from his eyes.