

From the novel The Trouble
With Jeremy Chance by
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JUMP

THE SPITE SEEMED to go out of the fence as days passed on and Cutter didn't get riled over it. In fact, Pa was the one who kicked the porch post each time he walked out the front door. I even heard him say a swear, which is something he told me never to do or face a night without supper.

I returned to school, but the truth was I couldn't keep my mind on my workbooks. I got to thinking about how fast things had changed all about me in the last year or so. First Davey went off to The War, then Ma died, and Sadie came to live with us. The house would never be the same without Ma, but I was counting on things getting better when my brother came back. I had lots to show him, like...

"Mr. Chance, daydreaming again?"

Miss Whately always called her students Mister and Miss, even the littlest ones in the class, who were only eight years old.

"No, Miss Whately," I said and gathered my books. I knew what was coming.

"You come sit by me," she said, tapping the desk next to hers with her ruler. "Then maybe you'll pay attention to your studies."

"Yes, ma'am," I said as I walked up the aisle. I didn't mind changing desks. I could daydream anywhere about Davey coming home.

On January twelfth, ten days after Spite Fence Day, snow blew down from the north of us and dumped another foot on the ground, which meant I wouldn't be walking to school for a while. The winds sweeping in from Canada froze Pa's fence into one giant icicle. The wood that was meant to look so ugly suddenly appeared kind of strange and beautiful, especially with the sun shining bright.

The day being Sunday, I was free after Bible reading with Sadie and Pa. We only went to proper church in town once a month because it was too cold to ride that far in the wagon in winter. Today the road was blocked altogether. I would get my Sunday lesson at home.

The Bible story that morning was of David slaying Goliath, which was one of my favorites. Sadie read it through and then asked me what the moral of it was. I said, "A body can do anything it sets out to do."

Pa nodded, but Sadie said that David had the Lord behind him, that's why he was powerful. A body could try as hard as he pleased and still fail, she said, if the Lord wasn't with him.

I wished to have the Lord behind me that very morning, because I had something frightening I was going to do: jump!

Every boy in these parts jumps from their second floor when they reach twelve years old. Pa said boys have been doing it since he was little. After he said this he waved his big hand in the air saying that didn't mean me because I'd probably break a leg and be useless for chores around the house and have to face his belt in the bargain. I didn't fancy the strap on my backside. But still, I couldn't think of anything Pa could threaten me with that would keep me from jumping. It was just something a boy had to do.

I'd been waiting all winter for the perfect snow. Davey said you wanted a foot of fresh snow overtop a couple of feet of packed snow. That way you were sure to land soft. When I looked outside from the front window, that's what I saw: new snow rising right up to the sill.

So after we finished with David and Goliath I pulled on three pairs of socks and Davey's knee-high boots and two pairs of Pa's old mittens and my red cap with the drop ears and Davey's jacket and Ma's long scarf. Pa passed me in the kitchen and said it was right democratic the way I borrowed something from everybody rather than all from one. He asked me where I was off to and I just said "outside," which was true. Then Sadie came downstairs looking at me like she knew I was up to no good but she couldn't tell exactly what kind of no good it was.

I went up to my room and closed the door behind me. Then I pushed up the window, which was awful hard to

do being just about frozen. I got it open wide enough to stick my head out, and the air felt cold as ice on my face. Down below me was nothing but white. It looked like clouds, but I knew it was harder than it seemed.

I pulled my head back in and pushed the window up higher and I stuck one leg out. Then I swung the other over the ledge, and there I was sitting in my window, holding on to the inside. Suddenly I thought maybe this wasn't the best day to be jumping. What if I did fall wrong and broke my leg or knocked my head? Pa or Sadie wouldn't even know I was out there. I could freeze myself into an icicle before they found me. It made more sense to jump when someone else was there, like Davey. It would be more fun, too, being watched.

I started to pull myself back inside when I said to myself, "Jeremy Chance, if you're too scared to jump, just say you're too scared and go on about your day. But don't go pretending you want to wait just to show off to Davey."

I sat there for a few seconds, half in and half out, not feeling inclined altogether one way or the other. It seemed to me that I was thinking too much about this. I remembered Davey saying that sometimes you had to just stop thinking and throw yourself into a situation no matter the consequences. He said there was *good scared* that kept you from doing stuff that could get yourself killed and *bad scared* that kept you from trying new things. I figured that right then I was in the grip of bad scared and the only thing to do about it was yell "Bombs Away!" and push myself off.

Suddenly I was in the air, like someone had pulled the world out from under my feet. I felt like a bird—but not a bird soaring over the land. I felt like a bird shot out of the sky and falling fast. I crashed into the ground feet first and tried to roll, like Davey told me. But my legs sank so far into the snow that I was standing straight, buried up to my chest. I'd lost my cap in the air and my ears were stinging from the cold, but otherwise I was fine. I'd done it, jumped from the second floor like Davey did, and three months younger, too!

"What in Lord's name?" Sadie burst out the front door looking at me with such a confusion on her face as I'd ever seen. Pa was right behind her. "I was looking out the window," she said, "and all of a sudden a body comes dropping past. My heart stopped, I swear it did," she said, clutching her chest.

Pa laughed at her fright, and that made Sadie mad.

"You laughing at that boy of yours falling out a window? Could have killed himself and scared a woman to her death. That would have been two bodies to deal with in one morning."

Pa wiped his face of his grin. "Guess we should have warned you, Sadie, but I didn't know the boy had it in him already. Jeremy didn't fall. It's a tradition in these parts to jump into the snow about his age. Davey jumped some years back. I jumped myself from that same window when I was a boy. My pa did the same. The snow gets so deep up here year after year, you just can't keep looking out at it without jumping once in your life."



Sadie shook her head. "I don't know if it's the cold up north or what that makes people crazy. But I'll tell you, I ain't tending that boy if he's hurt. He can crawl to do his chores if he has to." With that Sadie turned back and hurried in the house.

"You break anything, Jeremy?" Pa asked me.

"Don't think so."

He stepped into the snow a little ways and reached out his hand. I took it and he yanked me free. As we went inside, he patted me on the back a few times like knocking off the snow or congratulating me, I couldn't tell which.

