

Long Ride Home from Tumavaca

Slim Sherman leant against the corner of a mostly ruined adobe cabin near Tumavaca Mexico, one leg bent back against the wall, hands resting easily on his gun belt. His expression was grim as he surveyed the aftermath of the ride all five people present had made from Wyoming to Tumavaca. Slim the outsider of the group watched the other four people around him intently, the two men from the Diamond D ranch, Arnold DeWalt and his foreman George Tanna, DeWalt's beautiful wife Laurel and Slim's friend Jess Harper. They had all ridden a long way to finally understand, as they faced each other, that no-one would be returning with their dreams and plans fulfilled.

Jess Harper stood beside him, also leaning against the adobe wall, but he was nowhere as easy as Slim. Just judging from Jess's tension, Slim knew he had reason to be concerned about how Jess would respond to the aftermath of his long ride. Because instead of finding a life with a beautiful woman whom he had had good reason to believe loved him, the ride down for Jess had led to a killing and a ride back knowing he had been taken for a fool by her.

If Jess was planning on riding back to Wyoming at all, which Slim purely doubted.

Arnold DeWalt and his foreman George Hanna were sitting on their horses, Hanna clutching the carpet bag that contained the \$60,000 that Laurel DeWalt had stolen from her husband, and had cost the lives of the bounty hunters sent to retrieve her. The last killed by Jess not moments ago. Laurel DeWalt sat on her horse a little way apart from the others as defiantly she watched her husband and lover, both of them now ex, cautiously eye each other off.

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DeWalt's foreman George Hanna, appeared calm enough. He even seemed to accept Slim's hasty intervention that he and Jess were just drifters caught up in the fight, but Slim wondered by George's odd glance toward Laurel whether he really knew who Jess was and what had happened between Jess and Laurel.

If DeWalt himself realised what Jess and Slim were doing there, he certainly did not show it. To Slim, watching Laurel's husband, it seemed that the man was beyond caring or perhaps no longer had the strength to make any connections between Jess's presence and his wife.

Slim glanced toward Jess again, but Jess was watching DeWalt intently, and the expression on Jess's face was not one to make Slim any less concerned about what Jess was feeling. Jess's expression was disquiet, pity, guilt and perhaps some fear. Jess had told Slim that DeWalt was a hard man, a man Jess believed would kill his wife Laurel, if he caught her leaving him. Jess's hand was twitchy, waiting for Dewalt to react, fearful Dewalt would react, Slim guessed.

DeWalt seemed to slump smaller in his saddle. Perhaps when Jess had worked at Diamond D the cattleman had been a hard man but Slim could not see any resemblance between the man Jess described and the one sitting on the horse in front of him. The man in front of him, despite his blunt dismissal of his wife seemedbroken, as if he had lost all ability to fight. Slim with another quick glance at Jess, wondered if the fear on Jess's face was because he realised if Laurel could break a man like DeWalt she could have broken him too.

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And with just as little concern.

A frightening thought for a man like Jess, Slim realised.

The stillness was disturbed by George staring hard at Jess, then swinging his horse away. For a second DeWalt looked at Jess, with what in his eyes, Slim was not sure...sympathy, pity. Jess certainly saw something he did not like because he audibly sucked his breath, and his face went very dark as DeWalt turned to follow his foreman. Nearly beaten by the effort it had cost him to break free of Laurel, DeWalt seemed to shrink even further into the saddle, as he rode away.

Jess's eyes followed DeWalt, seeing a man who would never again be the towering figure he had once been. A man cut down by an amoral woman who damaged and destroyed all things, all people, she touched. Jess still leaning against the adobe wall beside Slim went rigid as DeWalt slumped in the saddle. Jess's expression changed to even deeper, dark anger. He slapped his thigh hard, then without saying anything almost ran toward his horse, which was still tied behind the house.

Jess mounted, hopping up to the stirrup and swinging the horse hard around before he had even touched the saddle. He started to move off then hauled the horse back hard, stopping for an instant to watch Laurel as she sat on her horse, staring past the space where her husband had been. Blond, indomitable, bewitching, her pouting beautiful face showing almost no emotion and yet at the same time, showing everything, anger, fear, courage, hate, passion and complete soullessness. For a second, Jess stared straight at Laurel but she looked past him, as if

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she was not even aware he was still there. Jess caught his breath, then his eyes narrowed, in anger, in pain, in self-disgust and his jaw tightened and he hit the bay horse with spurs, harder than was usual for him, bounding off in a thundering gallop back the way Slim and he had come.

Slim still standing by the shack where the bounty hunters body lay, shook his head, knowing for him the drama was far from over. He watched Jess gallop off then he straightened up, took his hat off, and put it back on so it sat higher on his head. He slowly walked over to where his own horse grazed, caught it, vaulted easily into the saddle then turned the direction Jess had galloped off.

For a second, or maybe an eternity, Slim did not know, Laurel still alone, still sitting on her horse, turned toward him. Her eyes narrowed sensuously, and she tossed her head, the yellow hair glinting in the sunlight.

As Slim moved past her she lifted her chin and deliberately licked her lips. Asking the question. A woman who would never be alone. Tempting him for whatever she needed in the aftermath of the long ride.

For Slim time stopped. He pulled his horse up, swallowed hard, and for another second or maybe forever, he met her knowing carnal eyes and he found himself breathing hard and shallow. Without being aware he was doing so, he moved his horse toward Laurel, mesmerised by the sheer beauty of her as she faced the world defiant. However, a sudden vision of Jess's angry self-disgusted eyes and DeWalt's broken figure stopped Slim in his tracks. He caught his breath, swallowed very hard and turned his horse back

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in the direction Jess had gone. He then tipped his hat to Laurel and rode past her, following the route that Jess took at a leisurely jog.

Laurel watched him go and then as he glanced back, she spun her horse, and to Slim's relief, sent it off at a gallop in the opposite direction to the way Jess went. And as she galloped away, Slim almost convinced himself he would easily forget seeing her face, as she watched Jess ride, her hair blowing in the wind defiant and beautiful; almost convinced himself that he would easily forget the invitation in her soulless eyes, almost convinced himself that he had not felt what he knew he felt.

Slim jogged his horse up the hill and then turned along the foothills back toward the Mexican village where Jess and he had first seen the bounty hunter galloping away with the money Laurel had stolen from her husband.

Jess was nowhere in sight which did not surprise Slim. As Jess's tempers went, this was one of his better ones. Slim bet himself as he rode toward the village, that the job he had set himself, to get Jess back home, was only just starting.

On the rough ride to Tumavaca from where Slim had met Jess on the trail, Jess had taken the time to ask how Slim knew he was in trouble. Slim had, and in hindsight realised foolishly, told Jess the truth of the two bounty hunters coming to the ranch.

"I had to tell them where you were" Slim explained to Jess. "I couldn't risk them harming Andy to protect you....or her, you

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understand. So I figured the next best thing was to come after you.”

“No” Jess had agreed his voice rasping dry and his expression tight and painfully vulnerable, “You couldna’ put Andy at risk, just on account o’ protectin’ me.”

At which point Slim knew he had made a huge mistake, one that was going to make the job he had set himself, that of bringing Jess home, so much harder.

If Slim knew Jess and these days he thought he did, when Jess calmed down he was going to feel like a complete fool for having been taken in by Laurel. Jess was going to be embarrassed, uncomfortable, totally unwilling to face Jonsey and Andy after having made such a fool of himself. If Slim knew Jess and he did.

All of which would mean Jess would have decided he was not going back to Wyoming. Because if Slim knew Jess and he did, Jess was going to come up with any number of reasons why it was in everyone’s best interests he did not return to Wyoming. Slim conceded that some of the reasons may be good ones. He already knew what many of them would be. He had heard quite a number of them from Jess on the Lo Lo trail the last time Jess had tried to help someone who did not deserve his misguided loyalty, when he and Slim went to Canada with Jess’s gone and not lamented brother in law Gil Brady. And Slim did not have a doubt in the world that there were considerably better reasons that Jess had not felt safe enough to divulge at that point. Slim had never pressed Jess to talk about his years in the drift. What he did know was some of the things Jess had slowly trusted him

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enough to tell, and from reading between the lines of what Jess did not tell.

So now here they were again at the other end of the country because Jess had again misplaced his responsibilities and loyalties. And if Slim was remembering that ride to Canada he could bet that Jess was too. And if Slim knew Jess and he thought he did, Jess was already regretting letting himself get talked into returning to the Sherman ranch after the ride to Canada. Slim was certain that Jess would have convinced himself that all it had done was cause more trouble for people Jess cared about, which Slim conceded was quite possibly true. He for one was riding up and down the country when he should have been running his ranch.

Added to all those reasons Jess could find for not returning to the Sherman ranch, was the fact Jess's goodbye to Andy before he and Laurel left had been painful for both of them. Andy had been hurting badly that Jess would walk away without a thought for those left behind, especially as Jess had all but said he was not returning to work at the ranch. Jess shrank from causing pain, especially to people he cared about. And if Slim knew Jess and he thought he did, Jess would be concluding that the best thing he could do for Andy was not put him through the pain again, not realising that the boy cared enough to worry himself sick at Jess's absence, dreading with every stage arriving that they would hear bad news, frightened every time he saw a newspaper that it would confirm that Jess had finally got himself into trouble he could not handle.

Slim could probably have named half a dozen people around Laramie, including the odd relative such as his Aunt Ella, who would have said good riddance to the departure of Jess and his

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troubles. In fact Ella had visited the ranch just the day before Slim has set out and caused considerable anguish for Andy who normally adored her, when she had all but danced a jig that the no account drifter, probable killer and all around dangerous Texas trash had removed his presence from the Sherman ranch voluntarily. Ella and Jess did not get along.

But none of that mattered because Jess had promised Andy he would come back, and Andy had taken it to mean that Jess would return home. And Slim had every intention of making sure Jess kept the promise sooner rather than later, regardless of any reason that Jess came up with for not returning to work at the Wyoming ranch. As much for Jess's sake as Andy's.

That Jess did not seem to understand how much his presence meant to the two Sherman brothers and Jonsey certainly made him a fool Slim conceded. But then if Jess had not been a fool he would not have made the run to Tumavaca on the whim of a beautiful amoral woman who was incapable of any feeling for another human being.

So when two bounty hunters had come to the Sherman ranch seeking Laurel and the Sherman Brothers had found out just what sort of trouble Jess had got himself into this time, as Slim saw it the solution was obvious. Because Slim had a young brother whom he did not want to see in pain and a friend who could not avoid trouble and had no idea how important his presence had become to the people on the Sherman ranch, Slim decided that the best solution for all of them was to bring Jess home, regardless of what Jess said about it.

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As soon as Jonsey had arrived home the morning following the bounty hunters visit, whilst Andy had poured out the whole sorry story to Jonsey, Slim had saddled up to go after Jess. Jonsey had not been as concerned as Andy that this time Jess really would not come back. He was more concerned about how difficult Jess was going to make it for Slim to get him back.

"Bad penny always turns up" Jonsey said. He packed some food for Slim "You figure that boy really needs rescuing from one little gal even if she is a bad 'un."

"Nope" said Slim "I figure he needs rescuin' from his own best instincts."

Jonsey laughed "Wal" he drawled "Figure on that one you're right. You didn't try and talk him out of goin'?" he asked.

"A chance she could have been what he needed. He sure wanted it" Slim explained. "Guess a man has a right to find out if what he wants is what he needs." He smiled "Figured the more I tried to talk him out of goin' the more likely I was to talk him out of comin' back."

"You're learnin' Slim" Jonsey said and Slim had grinned. "You know that boy Jess is goin' to give you a hard time gettin' him back" Jonsey warned.

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Slim had nodded in no doubt about how hard his task would be.

“You know that boy Jess has figured he wants a home here,” Jonsey added “but he ain’t quite figured he’s got a home here yet, so he’s gonna be busy mournin’ what he thinks he’s lost. An’ he’s goin’ to feel awful foolish throwin’ his chances away on a bad un’ like that woman. An’ he’s goin’ to be figurin’ that he’s more trouble than he’s worth to anyone keepin’ him around. Again.”

“I know how hard it will be” said Slim with feeling “Andy reckons every time Jess has been dragged off somethin’ always brings him back. This time he’s gone off on such a fool’s errand, I reckon’ the somethin’ that drags him back is goin’ to be me.”

“Nothin’ like makin’ a fool of himself to bring out the stubborn in a fella, especially a young fella” Jonsey said.

“Reckon if nothin’ else I can out-stubborn Jess” Slim said with a grin.

“Reckon” Jonsey agreed.

“If it’s humanely possible to get Jess back I’ll get Jess back” Slim promised Andy before he left. “No promises about keepin’ him here when I get him back.” He added.

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“Jess’ll figure he wants to stay home when he gets back” Andy said confidently. “He ain’t that bigger a fool.”

Jonsey snorted. “Good luck to you up till Jess figures that” he said as Slim rode off, bound for south road Jess had taken.

Slim had actually had some hope when he did meet up with Jess, and saved him from the third bounty hunter, because Jess was clearly pleased and grateful to see him, that perhaps he was mistaken. Jess would return home without an argument. The hope lasted for as long as it took Jess to get to his feet and go charging off to Mexico to fix the unfixable.

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In Tumavaca, Slim reached the village still going along at an easy pace, scanning the road to see if the two men DeWalt and Hanna were there but they were not in sight.

Unfortunately neither was Jess.

Slim frowned. Jess must have been riding as hard as only Jess could when he was in a temper, and that temper was fuelled this time by embarrassment and self-disgust as the full foolishness of what he had done with Laurel hit him.

Which meant Jess was really moving.

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Slim, feeling a little guiltily, wondered if he should make an effort to report the dead bounty hunter to authorities. Then decided against it. The chances were that Mexican authorities even if they were around this remote area would not be interested in Americans killing each other. But if they were interested, Slim winced at the idea of explaining to them why Jess would kill a murderer then go riding off with lightning under his tail. He wondered what the likelihood was the authorities would understand that a man was just plain embarrassed when he realised he had been used as a fool by an amoral woman. Not good he concluded.

Slim smiled to himself. At least he was not going to die wondering how Jess kept getting himself into trouble. What he did wonder was how Jess had survived this long getting himself into the trouble he did. Luck and time Slim thought. Both of which could run out at any moment. Of one thing Slim was certain. Jess had a better chance of hanging onto both luck and time at the ranch in Wyoming than he ever would on the drift and finding trouble on his own. At least at the ranch, mostly Jess got to wait until it arrived.

Slim turned onto the main road still moving at a gentle jog because he felt that the villagers had had their patience pushed enough by Americans galloping and shooting their way through the village that day. He glanced around him as he rode. Mostly the village consisted of small houses but there was a store attached to the bar which he had hardly noticed on the way in. There were quite a number of people about, and they all stopped to watch him, some with curiosity; some with suspicion.

Slim glanced at the depleted state of the canvas bag he carried over his saddle. He had coffee but not a whole lot else. Food

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could be a good idea he thought. Andy got a lot of his wild animals home following food, and Jess had been living off trail rations since he left the ranch.

Slim pulled up, dismounted and tied his horse to the veranda post in the front of the store. He felt in his pockets as he did. He was not exactly flush with money. He never kept that much cash at the ranch and he had to leave most of what was there in case Andy and Jonsey had some emergency, so all he had was \$20 and \$5 notes hidden in the safest pocket he had, some silver dollars in his pants pocket, and some loose change in his vest. Still he thought that probably made him a wealthy man in Mexico.

There was an elderly man sitting on the veranda working away at some wood carving.

“Buenas tardes, señor” Slim said to the man “Inglés?” he asked hopefully and unsuccessfully as the man shook his head, without any regret at all.

Slim frowned and nodded “Hombre?” he asked carefully. “Caballo?” He pointed at the road.

“Si Señor” said the man more interested in his work.

“How long?” Slim asked.

The man shrugged and went back to his work.

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“Horas” Slim asked and held up a finger.

The man shrugged again, uninterested. “Si señor” he said then he held up a finger and bent it in half.

“Si” said Slim hoping that meant a half hour.

“Dirección” Slim asked pointing at the road.

The man thought about it then slowly pointed to the road going south. Slim’s heart sank. If Jess had gone south it was going to be a long hard ride in the wrong direction before Slim even had a chance of convincing Jess to turn around to come home. At least if Jess had turned north, Slim would have had a chance to work on him while they were riding in the right direction.

Slim went into the store. There was not much there, but they must have had some passing trade because he was able to buy fresh tacos and brown sugar cakes, as well as some apples. It cost him one of his silver dollars which was robbery and he started to argue, but then he remembered he had shot up the village that afternoon, so that robbery may have been justified and with a wry smile he paid the dollar.

He packed the food in the canvas bag and mounted, turning south. The man on the veranda had been joined by several others, who all watched him with something like amusement. Slim frowned suspiciously. He rode a few yards and stopped and just

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hope against hope asked “Un hombre?” and he pointed to the south road.

The man exchanged glances with the other men and said “Un hombre no señor”

“What do you mean?” Slim asked getting confused.

The man grinned, and his companions laughed. They were obviously enjoying Slim’s confusion.

“Un hombre no señor” said the man, “Dos hombres.

“No dos hombres” Slim said “Un hombre.”

The men looked at each other and the old man smiled.

The old man said “Un hombre rápido” and to Slim’s immense relief he pointed to the north road. “Horas.” The man added, enjoying having Slim at his mercy.

However Slim was so relieved, he ignored the smile around the man’s lips. He could not really blame the villagers for having their fun after the crazy rider shooting up through their village.

He tipped his hat to the man “Gracias señor” he said. Then more happily than he could have believed, turned onto the north road.

Slim jogged along. It was no use chasing Jess hard. He knew Jess and there were a few things he could rely on Jess doing, no matter how bad his temper. Jess would look after his horse so that sooner or later he would stop for the horse if not for himself.

And Jess would feel obligated to wait for Slim to give the thank you speech. Jess would not go drifting off without doing it. However much Jess had convinced himself he was the outsider again, wandering on his own, putting himself out of bounds, Jess would feel he owed Slim and himself the thank you and would not leave until he had done it.

Over the last few months Slim had gained a pretty good idea how the speech went.

Thanks for the fire and thanks for the roof, thanks for riding beside me and thanks for trusting me, thanks for coming after me, and fare thee well.

Slim also understood how much Jess would mean it and how much Jess would be hurting when he said it. And that Jess would lite out as soon as he said it.

“Which Jess, you ain’t gonna get a chance to do” Slim said out loud.

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There was still no sign of Jess up ahead. So Slim mused to himself, in between admiring the spectacular openness and space around the road, how he would get Jess home. The one thing he was sure would have no effect was trying to argue Jess out of leaving. Jess had heard every argument Slim knew to convince him to stay on already.... several times. Probably on his angry ride Jess was going over each argument and losing the case to stay without any help from Slim.

So Slim decided his best chance was to avoid arguing at any cost. All he had to do was keep Jess pointed north and dodge letting him make the thank you speech long enough to get close to Laramie. The closer they were to Laramie if or when Jess realised he had been conned, the better the chances Slim could drag him back to the ranch, regardless of his objections.

As he rode on Slim found his mind drifting back to those last minutes just before Laurel had left. He could see her face, the expression, the invitation and he could almost imagine what it would feel like to have her. And just a small, small part of him regretted the loss of just knowing what it would have been like. And another part of him had not the slightest trouble understanding why Jess had thrown away everything he had built for himself, all hopes of finding a home and of belonging. When he saw Laurel DeWalt in Wyoming, Slim had just been angry with what she was doing and it had taken all his restraint not to tell Jess what a fool he was being. When Laurel had looked at him so in Tumavaca, it had taken all his restraint not to throw everything to the winds and follow her. For an instant Slim was struck by an overwhelming sense of regret that he had not accept the invitation she had offered, even knowing why it was offered. Then Slim thought about the broken figure of DeWalt and the reason he was jogging northward along a Mexican road after Jess.

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“No good at all,” he thought “Just about as fool thing as I could do” he admonished himself. “Then I’d be needin’ Jess to rescue me.”

Would Jess rescue him? Slim was pretty sure that when Jess slowed down and realised Slim was missing in action he would. In an instant. Then take great pleasure in pointing out that Slim was a fool to look at the woman. A bigger fool than Jess had been because Slim knew what she was. In fact it would make Jess very happy to do it, and say it.

Slim considered the possibilities. If he played it right he could maybe keep Jess yelling at him until they hit Wyoming, maybe even the ranch road. Perhaps it was worth a try he thought, stopping and half turning around. Perhaps it would be even worth finding out what that knowing carnal look had meant. He touched his spurs to his horse and it leaped forward. Then as it plunged the vision of DeWalt’s slumped figure flashed in front of Slim and he pulled up hard. He shook his head and determinedly turned north. He realised that there were some things far too dangerous for a man to do, even for friendship. All in all, the further Jess and he got from Laurel and the closer to Wyoming the better.

Slim jogged northward. A few miles on he passed some sheep herders who confirmed they had seen a rider on a bay horse heading north....rapido.

Slim thanked them then and jogged on. He passed some more time wondering if he ought to warn Andy not to laugh at Jess for making a fool of himself. “Nah” he said out loud. “Good for Andy

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to know Jess could make as big a fool of himself as anyone else. Bigger” he added taking considerable pleasure in the thought.

Slim passed some more time considering even if he could keep Jess going north, how many places there were for him to veer east or more likely west, if he knew Jess and he did, if given the opportunity. The border for a start he thought. Maybe the Santa Fe trail. Maybe a few of the westward trails in the New Mexico territory. Better he decided if he could keep Jess on the east side of the mountains all the way to Wyoming. The road would be rougher, the Indians more dangerous and country more treacherous than the easier path Jess had followed down. On the other hand there would be the advantage of a mountain range between Jess and any westward plans he might have, all the way through New Mexico and Colorado. Slim knew that he would have to be careful, Jess knew the country well. Even if he foiled one opportunity to head west, Jess would be planning on the next. It was going to take some fancy work to keep Jess heading north because if he realised he was being taken north, the chances were he would get very stubborn.

“It’s going to be a long ride home from Tumavaca” Slim told his horse as he jogging on.

A little way up the road, Slim came to a small hut where some children were playing and a woman was in the front yard milking goats. She watched Slim as he rode up. He tipped his hat and asked if he could water his horse, she smiled at him and nodded and indicated a small well. While Slim drew some water he asked if she had seen a man on a bay horse. She could or would speak English and she told him a man with a bay horse had stopped to water his horse. But it was a while ago.

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Jess would never water a hot horse so Slim figured he must have calmed down enough a few miles back to walk the horse and cool it down. Perhaps a good sign that Jess was going to be reasonable by the time Slim caught up with him. Perhaps in cooling his horse down Jess had cooled himself down but Slim's hopes were dashed when the woman asked if Jess was a bad man.

"No" Slim told her shaking his hands to push his point "a good man." He said crossing himself to demonstrate

The woman shook her head in disbelief. She narrowed her eyes and then put her fingers on either side of her mouth pulling her lips down to give a good imitation of Jess's face when he was in a mood.

"Bad man" she said. "Better stay away." She told Slim "That one is trouble."

Slim tipped his hat as he mounted his horse "That senora is the pure gospel truth." he told the woman.

Slim sighed. "It's goin' to be a long ride home from Tumevaca" he thought.

Slim rode on, trying to concentrate on just how he was going to get Jess home, and doing everything he could not to keep seeing

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the vision of Laurel DeWalt's carnal gaze flash at him. Not entirely successfully.

He rode for some time and it was getting quite late. Slim was really wondering just how far Jess would move on, when into the distance away he heard one rifle shot. Slim touched his gun, then when the shot was not followed, he decided the one shot could be someone hunting and the most optimistic view was Jess stopping long enough to think of eating, or providing a meal to say goodbye over.

“Which isn't goin' to happen” Slim told his horse.

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Slim rode on until it was nearly dusk. He was very close to the border and starting to strain his eyes to see. He kept wondering just how far Jess had ridden and was trying hard to push down any concerns that Laurel's evil would have worked on Jess to such an extent that he would just leave and forgo the farewell speech. Because if Jess was willing to leave without doing it, Slim had no way of getting him back to Wyoming. Laurel had already destroyed any chances he had of making a home.

Finally, as the dark was closing around him and Slim was starting to wonder if Laurel had indeed won, his horse let out a whinny which was answered by the familiar one of friend. And to his overwhelming relief a short distance away, Slim could just make out Jess's horse picketed a little way from the road. Then in a sheltered spot near some bushes and trees Slim could finally see Jess. He was leaning over quite a good fire cooking a bird. Slim had to restrain himself from letting out a defiant yahoo that Laurel had not won. He took a hard deep breath, pulled his hat down low, and as casually as he could rode over to where Jess was turning a makeshift spit absentmindedly.

"Howdy" he said casually, looking down on Jess from quite a height.

"Howdy" Jess replied apprehension making his voice rasp. In the firelight Slim could see Jess's right hand was twitching quite violently.

"Duck?" Slim asked completely friendly, ignoring Jess's tension which far from reassuring Jess seemed to add to his apprehension.

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Jess took a deep breath and nodded, failing miserably at an attempt to be casual. "Water hole yonder, plenty of birds on it." he gushed pointing. "Figured we could take the time to eat. Talk" he added with just a flicker of a smile, his eyes narrowing and muscle tremouring near his jaw.

"Fine" Slim said so dry that Jess swallowed hard, then swallowed again.

"Slim" Jess started to say but faltered when by the fire light he saw, that despite the friendly tone, just how dark Slim's expression was.

"I'll fix the horse" Slim said.

"Fine " said Jess turning the spit to fast.

"Steady with that bird" Slim warned.

Slim deliberately moved the horse away, turning his back on Jess and then he allowed himself a small smile. He dismounted, unsaddled his horse and took his time rubbing it down before leading it to water hole for a drink, fully aware that Jess kneeling by the fire was watching him intently. As his horse drank, Slim glanced behind him. He could feel the tension coming from Jess.

Slim lead the horse back and still moving slowly picketed it fairly close to Jess's. As he turned back Jess stood up, getting ready to

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say something. Slim turned his back on Jess again, and went over to Jess's horse, running his hand down its back and legs.

"You run him hard today" he said conversationally to Jess.

"He's used to it" Jess replied a touch defensively "Slim..."

Slim turned his back and went over to where he had left his saddle. He carried it to near the fire then still with his back to a very tense Jess, dug around in the provision bag while Jess watched him. He pulled the coffee pot and makings out, then put the provision bag back on the saddle on the opposite side to the fire, as a clear don't touch message which Jess noted. He swallowed but did not say anything.

Slim started to make coffee, making himself so busy Jess gave up trying to talk and concentrated on cooking.

Later that night, they both lay back against their saddles on opposite sides of the fire. Slim realised after days looking after the ranch in his own, a long ride with almost no break trying to catch Jess, and then all the dramas of the day he was exhausted and all he wanted to do was sleep. Jess on the other hand even if he was tired, was far too caught up in his own thoughts to sleep. He kept moving about, getting up kicking the fire, or restlessly shifting position. He and Slim had barely spoken whilst they ate, and it was not a comfortable silence, at least on Jess's part. Slim was fairly happy with the way the conversation was not going.

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Finally as Slim was congratulating himself on getting through the first night and was just dosing off Jess asked "You awake?"

"No" Slim muttered considerably annoyed.

"Pretty close to the border" Jess said, and then far too casually he added. "Been thinkin' how it wasn't more than a few months ago we was on the other border."

Slim froze "I'll just bet you have" he thought, wondering how he could stop Jess talking. "Since you been around I sure been seeing more of the big open than I have for some time" Slim said carefully.

"I know" Jess answered. "We're near the border" he said again.

"I know" said Slim uncommunicatively.

"See any Indian signs on the way down" Jess asked building up to something else.

"Nope" said Slim.

"Yeah" Said Jess. "Looks like it will be quiet when yougoin' back"

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“Could be” Slim agreed more sure than ever that Jess was going to say farewell at the border.

“I been thinkin’” Jess said.

Slim decided saying the about time that was on his lips was probably a bad move.

“I been thinkin’ “ Jess said “ You didn’t stop in them Colorado pass through towns on the way down.”

“Nope” said Slim. “Came the way you did.”

“Not so good an idea to do it on the way back” Jess said. “Maybe go back the long way and miss ‘em.”

“Know how rough those towns are. Been shiftin’ cattle down to mining towns there since I got home from the war” Slim said the word deliberately but got no response. “Know how to be careful” he added wondering how this was going to lead to why Jess was not going back to Wyoming.

“Driftin’ through is different” Jess said seriously. “Better not to hit them alone” he added. “Go straight back” he said. “Slim...” he stopped clearly wondering whether Slim had taken note of the word alone.

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Slim decided he was better off pretending he had not heard the word. He took a deep annoyed breath, which he did not have to feign, because as Jess stuttered around for words to say farewell, annoyed was the mildest description for what Slim was feeling.

“Jess I’m tired. I been riding for days, barely slept catchin’ up with you. Nothin’ you can say that can’t wait.” Slim snapped and turned away. Jess was so planning on riding off at the border.

“I appreciate you comin’.” Jess said trying again.

“Appreciate it tomorrow. Or appreciate it now by shuttin’ up and lettin’ me sleep” Slim told him from the depth of his blanket and he was tired enough to mean it.

“Yeah” Jess agreed. He was silent for a while. Then asked “Slim?”

“Shut up” snarled Slim really meaning it.

“What happened to Laurel?” Jess asked, his voice hard.

Slim turned over to face Jess “Rode off southward” he said.

“She didn’t ask for help” Jess asked carefully “or anythin’?”

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Slim hesitated “Nope” he said eventually. “Figure she’d find... shelter before night fall” Slim said.

“Figure” said Jess his voice cracking slightly. “Slim.....”

“Put your hat down and shut up and let me sleep” snapped Slim and turned over.

“Ain’t got my hat” Jess snarled.

.....

The next morning they arrived at the border fairly early. Since they had woken at dawn Jess had been trying to start a conversation. But as Slim was fairly certain that any conversation he had with Jess that morning was going to end up with thank you and fare thee well he had flatly refused to say anything more than one word answers if he was forced into saying anything.

While Slim made coffee, Jess offered to take both horses to the water hole, and Slim just grunted instead of saying his usual thanks. Because that was a word he was not going to use near Jess any time on the long ride home. No sense giving him chances to start saying what Slim did not want to hear.

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Jess to his credit was trying hard “Look Slim.....” he said after untying the horses.

Slim grunted even louder and turned his back kicking at the fire. He knelt down to get the coffee going and Jess took a hard deep breath, giving up trying to start a conversation and led the horses down to the water hole.

After a totally silent breakfast of coffee and the last of Jess's cornballs, Jess tried again as they saddled their horses “Slim” he started to say “There's somethin'.....”

But he got no further because Slim found it necessary to thump his horse hard to make him let go his breath in order to tighten the cinch. The horse objected and slammed sideways into Jess who was nearly knocked over. Jess forgot he was anxiously trying to say thank you and good bye for long enough to yell at Slim for being a fool and Slim managed to take offence for long enough not to say anything to Jess until they were almost at the border. But he could not avoid being aware that all the way to the border Jess was restless, and glancing uncomfortably sideways at Slim who ignored him.

Slim was still pondering the best way he could get Jess past the cross roads on the other side of the border, when just before they crossed Jess spurred his horse slightly ahead and grabbed the bridle of Slim's horse pulling both animals up.

“Hey” Slim roared.

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Jess swung his horse to face Slim but still held Slim's rein "Slim, we gotta talk" he said. He gave the small half smile that Slim recognised as Jess really worried.

"Why?" Slim asked with a deep and totally uncommunicative sigh.

"Before we get to the border. I gotta say somethin'." Jess said.

"Why?" Slim asked again even more uncommunicative.

But Jess was not going to be put off. He kept a firm hold of Slim's rein and launched into what was clearly a planned speech. "I know you're mad at me about yesterday. I know you thought I coulda got both of us killed. But I had to..." he started to say.

"I'm not mad at you" Slim interrupted, snarling through his teeth. "And I only figured you'd get one of us shot. Just didn't know which one. Let go my horse" he ordered harshly. Not needing to play act because as they approached the border and he knew Jess was about to try to go, he had worked himself up to being furious with him.

"Slim" Jess said not be dissuaded. He rushed into the speech. "I gotta tell you... I appreciate what you did comin' after me, and I appreciate you not sayin' anythin' about Laurel. A man can feel foolish enough without..." He took a deep breath.

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“Right now I ain’t interested in anything you gotta tell me” Slim snapped and he was telling the truth. “Let go my horse” he ordered.

Jess tried to make eye contact. Slim ignored it and in the face of Slim’s clear anger, Jess apparently decided Slim would not understand how much he meant the farewell speech. He let go the bridle on Slim’s horse, spun his own around and rode harder than he needed to up the road. Slim watched Jess go for second or two, pushed his hat further back on his head and then he spurred his own horse beside Jess and they both moved fast until they crossed the border. Slim did not know whether to be amused because he was right that Jess was planning the farewell speech or angry because he was right that Jess was planning the farewell speech.

Jess was by this time so angry at being thwarted in his good intentions that he appeared to almost forget the reason he had them, at least until he slowed down as they crossed the border and asked Slim if he was regretting coming down to Mexico.

“Nope” Slim said honestly, then decided guilt was as good a weapon as he could use. “I got nothin’ better to do than chase border to border after you.”

The guilt worked until a mile or so on the other side of the border where the road became a clear cross road going north south east and west. Jess pulled his horse up hard.

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Slim stopped beside him and from under his hat watched to see what Jess was going to do. Jess glanced to-ward the east road but then spun his horse left, to face the west direction almost crashing it into Slim.

“Well at least I know he’s planning on going west” Slim thought “Don’t have to worry about east roads.”

Jess’s horse sidled hard into Slim’s which half reared and began spinning on the road. He met Slim’s eyes and started to say something. Slim decided he was not waiting to hear it. He touched spurs to his plunging horse and moved hard down the road, leaving Jess at the cross roads, nearly unseated from the suddenness of the crashing horses as Slim rode away.

Jess yelled out “Slim” but Slim paid him no attention.

Slim dared not look back. He kept riding on the north road waiting, hoping to hear hoof beats behind him. He heard nothing but at a slight bend in the road he got enough of a glimpse to see Jess still at the cross roads, his horse swinging and plunging. At least he had not turned west.

Slim held his breath as Jess let the horse swing west then ran his hand through his hair and spun the horse north, with a sharp angry pull on the reins. Slim let his breath out with a long whew, understanding how much Jess cared that he would not just give up and go without saying what he felt he had to say.

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“It’s a shameful thing” Slim told his horse “To take advantage of a man’s decency.” Then he remembered that he would not have to take advantage of Jess’s decency if Jess was not also acting such a fool. And there was no shame in taking advantage of a man who was acting a fool.

Slim slowed down around the bend enough to let Jess keep him in sight but figured he needed to be some distance from the border before easing up. Jess neither attempted to call him back nor speak. Already working out where the next road west was Slim guessed, if he knew Jess and he did.

Jess caught up and rode slightly behind but not saying anything until Slim stopped near a rise and started to walk and Jess moved beside him. Jess eyed Slim sideways and waited for Slim to say something, by this time as mad at Slim as Slim was at him.

“Soooooooooooooooooooo” Slim said finally.

“Yeah” muttered Jess.

“Short way back or long way?” Slim asked testing the waters.

Jess hesitated far too long in answering “Long way” he answered finally his voice very tight.

“Short way is faster” Slim said thinking on the short way there was a mountain range between Jess and the route west.

Jess shrugged "You want to risk Indians?"

"Why not?" said Slim. "Not like you got a woman to.... protect goin' back."

Jess shrugged and then seemed to make a choice and rode on ahead. His body was tense as Slim watched him and considered how much pushing Jess would take before he would force the issue. The leaving without the thank you was not likely but at least he was over the first hurdle. Jess had not gone west at the border.

It was going to be a long way home from Tumavaca.

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They rode on together with neither saying anything. Slim deciding not to push and Jess lost in his thoughts. Slim indulged a small hope that Jess would take being foiled about going west at the border as sign that he should just ride back to Wyoming, but knowing Jess and he did, it was more likely that Jess was just plain miserable he and Slim were going to be parting on bad terms.

Which Jess confirmed when some time later he asked again. "You mad about riding down after me?"

"Nope" said Slim.

"What are you mad about?" Jess asked seriously.

"You're a fool" Slim answered honestly.

Jess gaped at him, shook his head and rode on probably so unsure at what was wrong with Slim that Slim guessed he was thinking more of what was wrong with Slim than what had happened with Laurel. Not a bad thing.

However both Jess and Slim were reminded why they were making the long ride back when they came to the place where Laurel had tried to shoot Jess and he had been shot by the bounty hunter before she could do it.

They both stopped looking around and Jess's expression became grimmer and grimmer as he remembered the day before, whilst

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Slim watching him felt an anger toward Laurel DeWalt that was not usual for him.

She had used and all but destroyed her husband, broken him. And she had tried to do the same to Jess, on a whim. She had done her best to destroy the hopes he had of finding a place where he belonged. If Jess went drifting off, she would have succeeded and whatever chances Jess had had of not being killed or turned into something less than he was now were destroyed with those hopes. They would be lost when time and luck ran out or Jess's own best instincts led him down a path from which he could not turn back, or had nowhere to turn back to. If Jess did not go back to Wyoming, Laurel would have succeeded in destroying him and one day a stagecoach would bring the news Andy did not want to know, or one of the newspapers would report on things no-one at the relay station wanted to read about.

As Slim sat silently cursing Laurel, Jess let his breath out. His face was expressionless but Slim could not miss that his left hand was tapping erratically on his thigh.

"She was.." Jess finally said to Slim.

"Yeah" said Slim. "She was.."

"Yesterday when she was done, yesterday she spoke like ... she cut a man down to maybe a foot tall" Jess said, his voice slightly cracking with the pain of admission. "And the night before she made a man feel..."

“Did you?” Slim asked as casually as he could.

“Yep” Jess said shortly.

“Was it..?” Slim asked and had to fight back a small pang of roaring jealousy as well as an almost obsessive curiosity. He swallowed hard, if a look and a question in her eyes could keep sending his thoughts back to Laurel DeWalt, it was no small wonder that she could nearly destroy someone as fragile and vulnerable as Jess.

“Yep” Jess answered just as short. He was silent for a while. “You think” he asked “that’s what she did to DeWalt? Cut him down so often he couldn’t stand tall, ‘cept when she ...let him feel tall.”

“Yep” said Slim.

“Destroyed him” Jess said.

“Cut him down some” Slim agreed. “He seemed to have a good friend in that foreman fella. Maybe get a hand to stand up again.”

“Pitiful thing to see a man you knew to walk tall and know he’ll never walk that tall again” Jess said. “DeWalt was someone” Jess said “when I worked for him.”

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“Maybe DeWalt wasn’t as tough as you thought” Slim said slowly. “Maybe his friend knew it anyway” he added. “Got the feelin’ they’d seen each other through some tough times” he said.

Jess gave Slim a small half smile. “Man would be lucky to have a friend who knew him so well” he murmured.

Slim watched Jess carefully and quietly saying nothing. There was nothing he could say that Jess did not know. Finally after sitting staring at the spot where Slim had found him, Jess nodded and nudged his horse forward.

Slim took another look around the clearing and was about to follow Jess when he noticed something dark lodged in a small crevice in the rocks. He dismounted and walked over to it as Jess stopped to look back and see what he was doing. Slim reached into the crevice and pulled out a soggy and bent out of shape black hat. He held it up to Jess who just for a second grinned.

Slim vaulted into his horse and moved up beside Jess, handing the hat over with a wry smile.

Jess accepted it with a ghost of a smile “Thanks” he said awkwardly then took a deep breath. “Slim...” he started to say.

Slim realising he was getting on dangerous ground with just one word interrupted “You see any vultures over where those bounty hunters died?” he asked.

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“Nope” Jess said sharply, put out because he was cut off “Been looking. Someone maybe...”

“Yeah “ said Slim “ I wouldn’t normally...”:

“Me neither” Jess answered looking at the sky “But...”

“Yeah” Said Slim “Maybe better not stick around to have to explain” he added.

“That sounds more like me than you” Jess said with a small smile.

“Been keepin’ bad company lately” Slim answered as Jess, after jamming the soggy hat on his head moved off.

As they rode off, Slim looked back at the clearing, shaking his head that an amoral woman could have made a place seem so evil.

A short while later they came to where the road moved to the long trail. Jess hesitated, looking at back at Slim to see what he wanted.

“You know you was worried takin’ Laurel the short way because of the Chiricahuas”

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Slim told Jess "Should brought her. Might not had any Indian trouble for some time to come after they got her."

"Or maybe mighta had more trouble than we could manage after they got her" Jess said with a ghost of a smile. He turned westward "Might still be easier to go the other way" Jess said eying the west trail "Weren't bothered that way, comin' down."

"DeWalt and that foreman fella must have come the other" Slim interrupted quickly "and they seemed okay."

"Don't hurt to be careful" Jess said. "Don't mean there won't be trouble now."

"Don't mean there won't be trouble on the other one" Slim said thinking anything that worried Jess, about leaving him alone, like Indians, could be useful.

"Whatever you want" said Jess giving in a touch to easily.

"East trail" said Slim determined.

They changed direction slightly to where a trail moved eastward around the San Andre Mountains which as far as Slim was concerned was a safe direction because it put a very large mountain range and some very rough country between Jess and heading west. The trail went around the edge of the mountains. Far to the west they could see a high hill rise but northwards as far

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as the horizon was open land. Mostly Jess rode along locked in his own thoughts and wary of Slim's mood. Jess did not even seem angry any more, more lost than anything, and more determined than ever not to go back if Slim knew Jess and he did.

"Big land. Open" Slim finally said to Jess. "Goes on forever."

"Not quite" Jess replied flat voiced very carefully suspicious of Slim's mood change.

"Know it well?" Slim asked conversationally.

"Well enough" Jess answered still wary.

"Nothin' much around here" Slim pushed and waited. "No roads, people."

"Not this trail" Jess agreed finally feeling he had to say something "Long one goes near Los Cruces and gets more traffic goin' to the border."

"This one doesn't?" Slim asked normal easily and watching Jess carefully out of the corner of his eye.

"Nope" Jess answered.

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Slim nodded.

“Goes north for quite away” Jess finally told him. Then pushed hard because the silence between them was eating at him he added “We should meet up with the Socorro road tomorrow. Later if we don’t want to ride hard.”

“We should?” Slim asked carefully.

“Yeah said Jess “Trail more than a road” he added then gave what his plans away. “Goes all the way west to Arizona.” Then he shut up suddenly pushing ahead so Slim could not see his face.

“No point riding hard, horses could do with a quiet ride” Slim answered smiling wryly which fortunately as Jess was staring straight ahead he did not see. Inwardly Slim was smiling a great deal more. With the border a way behind them, and a mountain range to the west he figured Jess would put off his riding west, and his farewell speech plans until he reached the Socorro trail tomorrow. Jess would know that if he made the speech to far away from the turnoff, he was in for a long drawn out argument with Slim he did not want to have.

As long as Slim did nothing that would push Jess into getting into a temper and taking off cross country it would likely be late tomorrow before Jess started trying any thank yous and fare thee wells, so at least for a day Slim could afford to be friendly.

“Texas over east” Slim said friendly, casual.

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“Yeah” Jess agreed clearly suspicious of the change in tone.

“Gettin’ nearer to the Panhandle” Slim commented.

“Yeah” said Jess warily.

“Ever think of going back?” Slim asked easily. “Ridin’ through because we’re close.”

Jess narrowed his eyes and frowned at Slim but then must have decided talking about going east would be a safe conversation because he answered. “Thought about going back fairly recent” which was a statement that Slim bet himself was the honest truth.

“Decided no” Jess added which Slim also bet himself was the honest truth. “Nothin’ there for me now’ Jess said almost talking to himself.

Slim wondered if Jess was saying out loud the reasons he had decided to head west.

“Nothin’ to hold onto. Just memories. Not so good ones” Jess explained. “Makes no sense stirring things up, goin’ back. You know” he added. “Found out after the war you can’t go back.” he said. “Need to keep movin’ on.”

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“One place you can go back is home” Slim told him “Just means it wasn’t home. If you can’t go back.”

Jess turned to look at him.

“But even goin’ back home ain’t so easy” Slim told Jess “even when there are good memories. Things change. Even when its home. Wasn’t so easy goin’ home after the war” he said “Even when it was home.”

“Wouldn’t know” Jess replied shortly.

“Pa was dead and things weren’t the same” Slim explained “Had to ranch but felt... sorta locked in. Needed something” he swung his arm. “Open maybe like this. Started trailin’ cattle rather than just ranchin’. Got me out” he added. “Probably still would be if Ma hadn’t died and Andy was needin’ me home.”

Jess shrugged “Never figured you wouldn’t do what was right” he said.

Slim shook his head. “I was real tempted to just say it wasn’t home no more after Ma died” he admitted “But I had a home. Ma and Pa made sure of that for me. Owed it to Andy to make sure he has one.”

“You was lucky, havin’ a ma and pa who did right by you” Jess said. “Made a home. Didn’t happen so much for me.”

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“Figured that some time ago” Slim said.

Jess started to drift into his own thoughts again which Slim decided was not a good place for him to be...alone. “Just how long you been driftin’?” he asked wondering how dangerous the question was because Jess had never given anyone a straight answer to it. “You keep sayin’ you can never remember a time when you wasn’t. But if you were with your folks on the Panhandle, wasn’t always.”

Jess looked up and around him, taking in the long dark mountains and endless view of dirt and shrub stretching all the way to the horizon.

“Worth driftin’ to see places like this” Jess said. He rode on for while not saying anything while Slim silently cursed both himself for asking and Jess for not trusting him enough to answer. He started to wonder what could prod Jess into talking about things that would not lead to thank you and farewell.

While Slim was still thinking Jess suddenly said “Younger than Andy.”

“What?” said Slim.

“Driftin’.” Jess explained. “Old man was workin’ on over the Panhandle, workin’ shares on Chavez place. Only one out there lookin’ after 2000 head, and the deal was one beef a month for keep. Not enough meat on them longhorns to feed one a month let alone five kids and Ma. And Chavez was mean. Would have

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hung the old man if he thought one of them cursed longhorns was missin'. So Ma and the old man and 5 of us livin' in an adobe hut. Livin' off what Ma could grow and the old man could shoot. I was younger than Andy when the old man told me one day he didn't have enough to feed all of us. Said I'd best be on my way." Jess glanced defiantly at Slim to see how he reacted.

"Rough" Slim said very carefully not reacting at all. "Couldn't see Andy makin' it on his own."

"He would." Jess said shortly "Think you can't. Learn you can."

"Wouldn't want him too" Slim said.

"Me neither" said Jess.

Wondering how dangerous a place Jess was heading but deciding if Jess was talking he was listening, Slim asked casually "Ever go back?"

"So often" Jess said as if he didn't matter. "Figured early it wasn't home though."

"No one laid out the fatted calf" Slim asked trying not to sound like it was important.

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“All that ever happened was the old man complainin’ about feedin’ me when I went back” Jess said. “Went back one time when I was 15 once, had some money for ma. Old man wasn’t pleased to see me but sure took the money. Shoulda left straight off. Hung round and we was arguin’ about me still bein’ around when some fellas come up, pretending they was lookin’ for water. Pa was so busy arguin’ with me he was outa reach for his gun.”

“They weren’t after water?” Slim asked.

“Yeah and cattle “ Jess said “Outlaw Frank Bannister, you heard of him.”

“Helped send his brother to prison” said Slim with a dryness that made Jess blink “Me and Mort Corey and a few others went after him some time ago.”

“Mort Corey the fella who keeps talkin’ about runnin’ for sherrif?” Jess asked.

“That’s him” said Slim. “Bannister I knew was a piece of work.”

“So’s his brother” said Jess “Forty of ‘em, waitin’ over the rise. Must have figured one fella out there, get rid of him and it was easy pickins on Chavez cattle. Burnt the place with us in it. Ever see adobe in a fire”

Slim shook his head.

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“Explodes” Jess said flat voiced. “Three of us got out, watched the others die through the window” Jess said “Ma, the old man and the others.” He lapsed into silence.

“Bad” Slim said.

“Wondered sometimes if I hadn’t been arguin’ with the old man. He might have stood a chance against Bannister” Jess said. “He was a good shot. “

“Runs in the family” Slim commented and Jess made a tight smile acknowledging it. “Doubt it, would have made much difference from what I heard of Bannister. With forty guns” Slim added. “Just would have killed you anyway.”

“Guess. Didn’t get a chance to find out” Jess agreed, but Slim made some mental notes about dealing with Jess’s belief he was better off leaving when he cared about someone. “I’d have killed Bannister if I could have, tried to get him” Jess acknowledged “but he got caught up in Wyomin’, just after the war. Talked his way out of a hangin’. Outa reach. Still would kill him if I got a chance” he added watching for Slim’s reaction.

“Not so I’d blame you” Slim said. “Felt that way myself. Wanted to get someone bad when my folks died. Never did find out who killed Pa and ma just got sick. Ain’t a whole lot you can do about some cursed disease.”

“No” Jess agreed.

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“What did you do afterward?” Slim asked.

“Tried to find Bannister. Drifted some, met up with a gamblin’ fella taught me some tricks” Jess said. “Then the war. Joined before they made me. 17” Jess took a deep hard breath. “So now you know why there’s nothin’ back in the Panhandle for me. Not like you. You got roots, family.”

“Yeah” Slim agreed deciding the last thing Jess needed at that point was a homily on family. “My pa was a good man, but I always figured that was fathers did. Didn’t think it was so special then. Know better now” he said “Why I want to make it okay for Andy. He didn’t get so much time with pa. Like me.”

“He’s doin’ okay” Jess said “ Better’n okay” he added. You got a right to be proud.” He looked around, taking a deep hard breath “Sure is some country out here.”

“Doin’ my best “ said Slim “ Sure is some country out here. “ he said. “Open.”

“Open gets in your blood” Jess agreed “Worth driftin’ to say you seen something like this” he said stopping his horse to look all the way around him at the vast open space around and mountains beyond.

“Worth just ridin” Slim acknowledged.

.....

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They pushed along easily making good time without overly exerting the horses with a more companionable silence than they had earlier in the morning. They took a break at about noon near a small spring where they could water the horses and let them graze for an hour.

Slim decided if Jess was being not difficult he could reward him. He reached into the canvas bag and pulled out a couple of apples one to Jess who caught it. In surprise. It was also a mistake.

“You holdin’ out on me. What else you got in that bag” Jess demanded. He pulled the bag away before Slim could stop him and dug in out the tacos and cakes. “You cheatin’...” Jess exclaimed “You got real food in there, and you weren’t gonna tell me. Don’t you trust me?” he demanded.

Slim reached Jess and after a short tug of war managed to get the bag back, with only apples and a few cakes left in it.

“Figured if I told you I had it I wouldn’t have it tomorrow” he grinned as Jess looked disgusted. He glared at the empty bag “Figurin’ I’m right.”

“Don’t you trust me?” Jess demanded again, stuffing down tacos.

“Not so much when it comes to bein’ sensible ” Slim answered totally truthfully. “Not when you get a chance to act on what you feel instead of use your head. Like being hungry.”

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Jess snorted, then started to smile “It ain’t so” he said then suddenly flushed red.

“Got a few dollars on me” Slim said as he double the knotted the sack “Can pick up somethin’ up through Colorado” he suggested mildly but watching Jess’s reaction.

Jess sucked his lip, guilt all over his face which made Slim more certain than ever about his westward plans. “You take some advice from someone who has been called no account drifter more often than you had dinners” Jess said seriously. “Keep outta them Colorado pass through towns. Most of ‘em make a good livin’ griffin’ off fellas passin’ through. If you get out only bein’ triple charged for feedin’ your horse and buyin’ a plate of beans, count yourself lucky. Mostly it’s worse. Place up there I heard. Cordossa. Whole town run a game to see who can cadge the most. Force a fella into gettin’ mad, then by the time the law has fined ‘em everythin’ they own, they’re lucky if they still have boots to walk out in.”

“You told me.” Slim said carefully watching Jess’s reaction. “Two of us should be able to watch out. Cordossa” he mused.

Jess flushed even more guiltily. “Slim” Jess started to say “ “I’ve been thinkin’.”

“Liable to die of old age before we get there if we don’t get movin’.” Slim interrupted.

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“Slim....” Jess started again.

Slim turned his back shoving coffee and shoved the remaining food back in the canvas bag then stood up and walked off to retrieve the horses.

Jess let his hands go and fall down “We need to talk about some stuff” Jess yelled at him.

“Thought that was what we had done all mornin’.” Slim muttered. He caught both horses “What do you want to talk about?” he asked genially leading them back toward Jess.

Jess flushed, even more guilty, but faced Slim. “I’ve been thinkin’ since yesterday, maybe since I come down here” he said seriously working himself up to it. He took a deep breath.

Slim decided that a sacrifice of the innocent was necessary, if he was going to avoid the conversation he did not want to have. While Jess was working himself up to the farewell speech he slipped the rope from Jess’s horse’s neck.

“Since yesterday I been thinkin’.” Jess started to say again. “You been real good to me...”

“Oooooooooooooouch” Slim yelled as Jess looked at him in surprise. “You son of ... cursed brute” he yelled.

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As Jess stared at him confused, Slim stood back and thumped Jess's bay horse as hard as he could on the rump. With no rope to restrain it, the horse jumped sideways and took off, galloping a hundred and fifty yards or more, before stopping and turning, eyeing the two men with a mighty offended expression.

"What you do that for?" Jess spat out surprised.

Slim grabbed his right arm.

"Brute bit me" Slim said.

"Never bit anyone in his life" Jess snarled as Slim made a big fuss of rubbing his arms. "Didn't even tear your shirt" Jess said suspiciously.

"Can feel it bruising'." Slim insisted. He rubbed his arm. "Hurts like sin" he growled.

"Let me see" Jess demanded stepping forward to check Slim's arm

"Don't touch it" Slim snapped.

Jess gave Slim a dirty look, and picked up his bridle.

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“I’ll get him” Slim offered.

“Keep your hands off ‘im” Jess hissed.

He stalked off the hundred and fifty to catch his still indignant horse, which suspiciously skittered away for a few minutes, before consenting to stand still. Jess brought the horse back and spent some time going over him carefully, while muttering comments how the horse was safe with a baby and how Slim couldn’t tell a horse from a horse fly. “Your shirt ain’t even torn” he said as he finally finished saddling then mounted, and rode straight past Slim.

Slim made one last effort to clutch his arm as Jess rode by then smiled to himself and followed on.

For the next few hours Jess was so busy defending his precious horse’s good name, that all thoughts of what he wanted to talk about disappeared, to Slim’s relief. They rode on in a less than friendly fashion with Jess still angry for a few hours, when they stopped to water the horses again. Jess without asking removed the canvas bag from Slim’s saddle and took the remaining cakes from it, his expression daring Slim to argue. Slim raised his eyebrows but said nothing, pulling an apple from the bag and easing his conscience by sneaking Jess’s horse half of it when Jess was not looking.

“Watch you don’t get bit” Jess snarled sarcastically when he turned around to see Slim near his horse.

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They mounted up again, pushing northwards, the companionship of the early part of the day diminished as Jess, Slim presumed, contemplated his lost chances to say goodbye. However after some hours of silence, Jess must eventually have decided his best way into the conversation he wanted to have was any conversation because he started to talk.

“You never did tell me how you settled in Wyomin’?” Jess asked. The question was awkward forced and totally uncomfortable. “I mean you got kin around still” he added.

Slim was tempted to challenge Jess about why he asked but thought keeping him talking was safe for a day. Besides having the chance to stir Jess about Slim’s only remaining kin around Laramie. Jess must have been desperate to bring the subject up.

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Andy and Slim were very proud of Aunt Ella who was a tough ornary woman who took nothing from no one. She also smoked a pipe. Both Sherman brothers had long since discovered that if they avoided taking offence at anything she said, Aunt Ella could be as kind as she was ornary. She was eccentric, opinionated and very clannish about being a Sherman even though she was only a Sherman by marriage. Andy and Slim like to speculate why she never mentioned her own family. Slim was inclined to believe she eloped with Uncle Jack and was disinherited by her own relatives but Andy pointed out Uncle Jack and Aunt Ella never spoke to each other and it was more likely she had a much darker past than she let or on or as he asked Slim “Do you think Aunt Ella wasn’t always a lady?”

“From the mouths of babes” said Jonsey.

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Ella liked to make a fuss of family. Andy occasionally stayed with her when neither Slim nor Jonsey had been able to be home. Staying with Aunt Ella, Andy got to be the man of the house, given his due by being seated at the head of the table and then was completely manipulated, like every other male who came near Ella.

Both Andy and Slim adored her, not the least because she could out-cook any-one else in the territory and an invitation to dinner was something to keep them talking for a month. Even Jonsey adored her, whitening his collar and polishing his boots when the invitation to dinner came. She lived in a large house some miles up in the hill country on the other side of Laramie. The house thanks to what Slim suspected were less than honest dealings from his deceased Uncle Jack, was furnished with every comfort she could get into it.

Aunt Ella and Jess did not get on. Ella was frankly suspicious of him. He was not kin, and yet there he was a hired hand, living in “the” house, like a bunkhouse was not good enough for a no-account drifter. Their first introduction had not been good and relations had fallen steadily downhill from there.

Ella had driven over to the relay station to issue a dinner invitation to her family, and check out the new hired hand. Unfortunately in the middle of a best manners cup of coffee with Andy, Jonsey and Slim fussing Ella, Jess had burst into the house, covered in dust, filthy dirty from riding drag when moving cattle. He had seriously ripped shirt and pants, revealing underwear up past his knees, also ripped. Jess was roaring mad and cursing Slim as the cattle had gotten out following an old longhorn cow that Jess wanted to shoot because she was dangerous and useless. However Slim had

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a sentimental attachment to the cow. She represented the last of the Texas cattle his father had brought in before the war, and had somehow avoided any attempts to include her in roundups and trail herds. Now she was ancient and as ornery as Aunt Ella but Slim always found a reason not to shoot her. The cow had an uncanny knack of causing Jess difficulties, getting bogged when he was on his own, breaking down fences and straying off with a group of yearlings, then turning and charging, horns lowered wickedly when he had to move her. Every time he avoided another skewering on her horns, Jess laid into Slim about getting rid of her.

The sight and sound of a ragged dirty hired hand laying into a Sherman was nearly too much for Ella. She subjected Jess to her best look down the nose expression, and made some cutting remarks on how it would break Matthew's heart if he knew just what hard times his boys had fallen on so they had to take in any murdering range riff raff. Jess, not unsurprisingly, had taken offence, retreating to his surly best because he could not punch her out, which led, from Ella's point of view, to a very unsatisfying stand-off, while Andy and Slim exchanged glances and Jonsey shook his head.

Ella had however deigned to include Jess in the Sunday dinner invitation and despite all warnings from Andy and Slim not to let Ella get under his skin, things between Ella and Jess had gone badly. Even Ella's cooking had not eased the situation. Jess had not reacted kindly to a sit down Sunday dinner where everyone was supposed to be on their best behaviour except the hostess. Ella, determined to put Jess in his place as the hired hand, thought nothing of quizzing him on everything including his intentions, his honesty and his reliability, asking questions right down to how often he washed his underwear, and how many men he had

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gunned down that year. All of which got a very terse and surly response.

As dinner progressed, Jess had shown his displeasure more and more, and Andy and Slim exchanged glances, amused on Slim's part, concerned on Andy's. Jess finally jumped to his feet when Ella asked Jess point blank how much jail time he had served. Leaving an almost uneaten piece of strawberry pie on his plate he had thrown down the napkin that Ella had fussed about being used in a man's lap, not stuffed into his shirt. Slim who would have liked to have got a straight answer to that question himself, but knew that the answer would only come when Jess felt he belonged enough to share it, managed to stare Jess down before he let fly with the expletives that were on his tongue. Slim also managed to get a hard hand on Andy's shoulder as he showed every intention of jumping up to defend Jess. Jess finally mumbled something about how he thought he heard a horse making a noise, and stalked outside. Jonsey made some comment that Jess still learning about polite society to excuse him and Ella gawfed that unless there was a polite way to kill someone, Jess would never be ready. Which he heard.

Jess had spent the rest of the visit prowling round outside, while the other three enjoyed more pie and cake, Andy listening to Slim's whispered advice that Jess and Aunt Ella would work things out much faster if no-one else got involved. However thereafter whenever Ella saw Slim or Andy in town and Jess was with them she would offer an invitation for dinner, suggesting they also brought the hired man to hold the horses.

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"By how kin got to Wyomin' you mean you wonderin' how Aunt Ella came into Wyomin'?" Slim asked Jess as they rode along.

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"I know how she got to Wyomin'." Jess said with feeling.

"You do?" Slim asked trying not to laugh.

"Flew on her broomstick" Jess answered.

"That's my favourite Aunt you're talking about" Slim said mildly. "She came with Uncle Jack in the early days. Couple of pa's brothers first come. They were tradin' over in Nebraska with some of the mountain guys working over here and thought they would do better on the other end. Granpa kept the store and Jonathon and Jack moved into Wyoming. Pa was trail herdin' but visited and saw the land. Decided it was what he was lookin' for, so Jonsey and Ma and me all moved here. Jonsey used to be his trail cook."

"How come Ella is the only one left?" Jess asked.

"Indians"" Slim said "and fever. Had a few cousins but they never made it, so far" he said not offering a reason why and Jess frowned curiously but did not push. "Pa has another brother livin' down Texas, and Ella's got two daughters in Denver. Got some kin in Nebraska. Aunt Ella writes. She likes to tell me how well they are doin' from Grandpa's store. How much land they are buyin' up. Ella figures land means you're somebody." Slim grinned.

"Your Pa picked good land" Jess said carefully avoiding making a comment about Ella.

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"Its roots" Slim explained trying to find words for his connection to the land his father left him. "Nothin' left in Nebraska. Got family buried there but no real roots. Wyomin' ismine. Mine and Andy's. Its feelin' you belong. Even if Ella is the only kin left. That land has got Pa's sweat and blood on it, and it's got mine" Slim shook his head. "Figure that is how you get roots, workin' it, watchin' it reward you if you work it right. Fightin' for it, even when we ain't had no real proper rain for betterin' a year."

Jess nodded understanding. "I got family buried in the Panhandle and I don't belong there. No roots" he mumbled. He took a deep breath. "Talked about belongin' to Laurel a couple of days ago" he said after a few minutes. "She didn't think to highly of it."

"Figure'" Slim said. "Figure she wouldn't know a cursed thing about leavin' somethin' better'n when you came."

Jess half nodded became silent and rode on for a while, while Slim pushed away that his last vision of Laurel, beautiful and defiant, as it once again flashed in front of him.

When Jess made no attempt to keep talking Slim suggested "One Sunday after we get home, at dinner over Aunt Ella's if we can get her on the plumb brandy, she can tell you some stories about the old days. Raise your hair." He watched Jess's reaction.

"I didn't reckon it's likely I'd be doin' that" Jess finally answered clearly finding an advantage to not going back. "What did Jack die of? Rapid dog bite?"

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“That’s my favourite aunt you’re talking about. Ella’s a pistol” Slim said proudly.

“Ella’s a pistol all right” Jess said. “A loaded one. When she start on with the pipe?”

“She doesn’t think its lady like to smoke cigars” Slim explained. “Ma always reckoned she took up the pipe cause Uncle Jack couldn’t stand the smell and she couldn’t stand the smell of him and furs and such so they built a large house and sort of stood each other off.

“I’d of built another house if I’d been married to her” Jess said with feeling “opposite end of the territory, maybe the country. Don’t know how you can stand her.”

“Belongin’ with folks means you have to get used to folks bein’ who they are” Slim said.

Jess snorted and thought about “Ella had a point though about trouble following me” he said to Slim.

“I know” Slim said mildly, thinking almost any conversation with Jess was heading for dangerous territory that could end in the words thanks and goodbye. “Sure is some country around here.”

“Yeah” said Jess.

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Slim decided that trouble and Jess was far too dangerous a topic of conversation and started talking of plans to get by in the drought, while Jess disappeared into his own thoughts, grunting every now and again when it got through to him that Slim needed a response.

They rode on for the rest of the day stopping to rest and picket the horses after Slim picked off a jack rabbit

Jess had another night when sleep did not come easily, which meant Slim did not sleep that easily either worrying that Jess might just spit out the words and leave while he was half asleep.

So when Jess asked him if he was awake he, more or less, was. They were lying either side of the fire. Slim turned over to see Jess sitting up, holding a cup of coffee. Without asking Jess poured Slim a cup, stood up and took it to him.

“Been thinkin’,” Jess said as Slim sat up.

“What” Slim asked taking the cup. “Laurel?” he guessed as Jess went back to sit opposite him.

“Kinda” Jess admitted “Been thinkin’ about Troy Hatch sheriff up Rock Springs. Told you about him when I come back from deputyin’.”

“Told me some” Slim agreed.

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Jess nodded “Good man and he threw it all away over a no good woman. He ... just couldn’t help himself. Threw it all away over a woman who wasn’t worth even a dollar of his time.” Jess took a deep breath. “I lied about what he done, inquest an’ all.” He confessed. “Figured all that was left was his name, and what folks thought of him. She wasn’t gettin’ that.”

“You did what you thought was right” Slim said carefully.

“No I didn’t” Jess bit out. “Did what was wrong and I knowed it but he didn’t deserve that a woman like that should ...”

“Destroy him” Slim interrupted.

“They’ll do it to you” Jess said. “Don’t reckon you’d a perjured yourself for such a reason would you?”

“Can’t think I would, but I guess you never know until you face it yourself.” Slim answered carefully. “Jess he had a choice” Slim said seriously. “A woman like that is what she is, he could have not done it, he could have just quit dreamin’. He knew what he was doin’ was wrong.”

Jess stared into the fire for some minutes twisting his cup in his hands. He finally looked up a small twisted smile on his lips showing in the firelight. “Kinda understand why he did it” Jess said “Kinda understand when just dreamin’ about a woman can make nothin’ else matter. Make it so you would do anythin’ just to have her.”

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“Until you figure what you were dreamin’ about was only that. A dream, and wantin’ won’t make a woman into what you’re dreamin’.” Slim replied then deliberately added “No matter how much you won’t see what’s goin’ on under your nose. Like DeWalt.”

Jess was quiet for a while before he finally asked “Have you ever wanted a woman so bad you cain’t breath? And nothing fixes it not even havin’ her. Havin’ her makes it... worse. Maybe because you know havin’ her is wrong, and even that don’t matter. Even when you walk away, and you tell yourself you forget, sometimes just when you ain’t ready for it, just fallin’ asleep and you see her face, or smell somethin’ maybe flower or soap in a store and you turn around expectin’ her there. An’ just for second you think there is nothing’ you wouldn’t do, just to have her.”

“I’ve had my share of girlfriends” Slim said carefully “But if you’re askin’ have I ever ... wanted someone so bad right or wrong, I wouldn’t care how wrong it was. If it’s wrong, it’s wrong. That sheriff Hatch shouldn’t have done it.”

“That isn’t what I was askin’” Jess said “Maybe if you’d been the one to see what wantin’ so hard can do to a good man, a real fine man you’d figure it different.”

“It was wrong” Slim said certain. “And I guess Hatch knew, and I guess she destroyed him... because he let her do it.”

“Ever figure maybe right and wrong sometimes ain’t everythin’ Slim?” Jess asked.

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"I figure doin' what was wrong, is because it's the easy way out" Slim explained "And easy way out is blamin' her because it was too hard to do what's right."

"Well you won't mind so much if I ain't to kindly when it does happen to you?" Jess asked after a while.

"Figure if I start actin' so foolish, you'll have the right" Slim agreed and Jess snorted.

Sometime later Jess asked "You know what Laurel would have done if I hadn't gone with her. To Tumavaca?"

"Found someone else to do it" Slim answered brutally.

Jess was quiet. "I reckon I remember DeWalt bein' taller" he said finally.

"You walked away from her once before Jess" Slim bit out not pretending he did not know what Jess was talking about. "She can only cut you down if you let her."

Jess grunted and Slim wondering whether he had said too much, turned over and shut his eyes and just for a second had to push away a vision of Laurel DeWalt's beautiful soulless face.

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The next morning they saddled up at first light, riding along in reasonably companionable silence, which worried Slim more than any arguments. Some time that day they would get to the Socorro trail and somehow or other he had to get Jess past it, and then past the numerous other trails heading west toward Santa Fe before they got to Colorado. Slim was starting to feel if he could get Jess into Colorado his chances of getting Jess home were very good. Jess's carping about the trouble you could get into in some of those pass through towns was not unfounded. Slim had done enough wild riding after the war to have experienced some of the problems himself, and if he knew Jess and he did, Jess would not leave him stranded so if he could play Jess along things might go his way.

But they were still some way from Colorado.

It was unlikely that Jess would fall for a flat refusal to talk this time. If Slim knew Jess and he did, Jess would be figuring that given Slim's current moodiness, he was not going to get a chance for a friendly farewell, so somewhere very close to Socorro trail Jess would simply yell it out the farewell and move on, deeply regretting that the two of them would part on bad terms.

Slim could follow Jess west but sooner or later, more sooner than later if Jess really believed he was doing the right thing by leaving, which Slim figured he did or he would not be trying, Jess would find a way of leaving Slim behind. So keeping Jess moving north was the best choice as long, as Jess did not work out he was being taken.

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Slim contemplated the problem for some part of the morning. The food plan might have worked, if he had managed to have a chuck wagon along. Perhaps it was worth another try to veer eastwards. Slim tried a suggestion about veering eastward toward Texas.

“Thought you wanted to get home?” Jess asked tersely.

“You ain’t not goin’ back to Texas ‘cause you wanted or anythin’ are you?” Slim asked opting for keeping Jess talking.

“I told you why I ain’t goin’ back” Jess snapped.

“Okay” Slim answered a touch defensively. “You tell me you were never in trouble in Texas and I’ll believe you.”

Jess rode on in guilty silence while Slim followed. Finally Jess laughed. “Had some trouble” he admitted finally. “Sherriff down in Laredo got anythin’ about me pulled, some years ago.”

“Nice to have a friend” Slim commented drily.

“Wasn’t a friend” Jess answered carefully. When Slim did not respond, he sighed “Sherriff felt guilty for tryin’ to hang me for somethin’ I didn’t do, second time someone near hung me” he said “so he thought getting’ anythin’ else pulled made up.”

“Did it?” Slim asked casually.’

Jess shrugged” I’m alive” he said.

“Why they try to hang you?” Slim asked still keeping it as casual as he could.

Jess thought hard before he answered. “Figured I was guilty of robbin’ and murder. Shootin’ the place up after an express office robbery. Knew a girl” he finally told Slim and watched carefully for any reaction from Slim who carefully avoided showing any. “She had some mighty rough kinfolk and well she was...”

“Really something?” asked Slim with a grin “so doggone attractive, you just got dragged along.”

“Wasn’t that attractive” Jess replied “But yeah she was really somethin’.”

Slim pulled a face that was not quite sympathetic “How close they get to hangin’ you?” he asked casually.

“Gallows” Jess answered, not quite casually “Rope around my neck.”

“Lucky you got a reprieve” Slim answered.

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“Didn’t” Jess muttered as Slim looked at him “Not then any way. Had to shoot my way out.”

Slim shook his head. “How do you shoot your way out of your own hangin’ party?” he asked curiously.

“Undertaker was a pal” Jess said as if that explained “Cost me though” he added.

“Yeah” said Slim.

“Yeah” said Jess “had to get him a new undertaker’s hat. You got any idea how much those things cost” he said “Took every cent I had and more.”

“Never figured they were that expensive” Slim said

“They are” Jess said with feeling.

“How did you near get hung the first time?” Slim asked figuring if Jess was talking, he was listening.

“Wrong place wrong time” Jess answered “fellas got mean about a girl gettin’ hurt, out to lynch someone. Just happened to be in the way.”

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“Shoot your way out of that one” Slim asked

“Nope” said Jess. “Fella helped me out. Never did get to say thanks” he said.

Slim caught his breath at the word thanks.

“Slim” Jess started to say.

“So it was a girl both times you near got hung” Slim interrupted as Jess started to bristle and forgot what he was about to say thanks and farewell. “You ever figured Jess that you got an invite to trouble stamped on your forehead.”

Jess became indignant “It ain’t so” he declared “I never do invite it.” He thought about it and smiled slightly. “Comes along without no invitation” he said. “Ella’s right. It ain’t healthy sometime around me” he watched Slim carefully. “So Slim” he started to say.

“I noticed” Slim interrupted. “Getting quite a passing acquaintance with trouble since you come home.” He added deliberately testing Jess’s reaction to the word. “How many posters that sheriff have to pull?” he asked.

“Quite a few” Jess admitted. “But it wasn’t all the posters. Some trouble you can’t pull with a poster.”

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When Slim frowned, Jess said “Roney.”

“Fella was stark ravin’ crazy” Slim said emphatically.

“I know” said Jess with feeling. “Roney ain’t the only crazy fool I ever knew neither.” He watched Slim carefully for a reaction.

“Course Roney wasn’t the only crazy fool to come by the door since started with the relay station” Slim said before Jess came up with an explanation he was leaving so crazy fools did not come visiting the relay station.

“Mmm” said Jess lapsing into his own thoughts, clearly listing in his head the trouble that had not yet arrived at the Sherman Ranch.

“Reckon Mose can tell you about the Bishop’s wife” Slim said watching Jess out of the corner of his eye. He would have liked to have known what was in that list but knew that was something Jess would only talk about when he was ready. “I reckon it must have only been second or third time stage came through though.”

“mmm” said Jess.

“So” Said Slim and started talking, watching Jess carefully for any signs of the thank you speech. This time Jess did not pretend to listen enough to get the mm’s in the right place. Slim talked on and Jess became more and more distracted.

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“So” said Slim finally “When Mose comes down the hill, the stage is runnin’ so fast, and the women screamin’ fit to bust. The Bishop’s wife is yellin’ louder than the dance hall girl. Course that was all we thought she was. Didn’t know she was one of them Younger boy’s girlfriend at the time. Mose may have been a might more careful. And if he had known the other one was the Bishop’s wife, and the same woman they knew from the old fort then I reckon he would have been downright careful.”

“What Bishop’s wife?” said Jess coming out of his reverie.

“The one I just told you about” said Slim innocently “Were you listenin’ to me?”

“Sure” said Jess looking confused.

“So I figured with the way those women were carryin’ on, it was just the start of it and just had to be doggone careful about folks gettin’ off the stage. Stage is just a natural means of trouble and crazy folk. But I won’t forget that Bishop’s wife in a hurry.”

“Figures” said Jess clearly bewildered and was fortunately far enough ahead of Slim not to see him smiling to himself.

“How far to the Socorro turn off?” Slim asked.

Jess shifted in his saddle nervously. “Quite a ways” he said and lapsed into silence again.

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Slim wondered how long before the trail Jess would start the speech. Jess would have learned from his thwarted attempt at the border not to try to early. Right on the turn off was Slim's best guess. As in thank you and fare thee well and turn away no extra words said.

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Slim rode along keeping just behind Jess watching for any signs that the farewell speech was coming, at the same time scanning the route ahead for a sighting of the west trail. Up ahead everything seemed similar open path followed by long open ground to the right and a mountain range to their left.

Midway into the afternoon Slim's watch was rewarded by Jess showing distinct signs of agitation. For about half an hour Jess fidgeted looked around and kept glancing at Slim then scanning the distance mostly to the left.

Jess finally became quiet after scanning the horizon and Slim straining to see what Jess was seeing, recognised what could have been a trail going off to the left some distance up ahead. There was nothing between the trail and the road they were on except open plain and Slim decided his best bet was to start as soon as Jess gave him an opening.

A little further on Jess pulled up and Slim moved past him. Jess had taken on the rigid stance of someone who had made up their mind to do something very hard.

"Slim" Jess said his voice tight.

"Yeah I know" Slim said his voice taking on careful note of worry.

"You do?" said Jess.

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“Been feelin” something ain’t right for an hour or so” Slim said.

“You have” said Jess clearly concerned.

“Yeah” said Slim who to Jess’s confusion dismounted to run his hand down his horse’s left shoulder “Doggone it, this is a good horse.”

“What” said Jess now thoroughly confused.

“Horse seem lame to you?” Slim asked trying to sound as worried as possible.

“No” Jess answered shortly.

“Figure it’s in his right shoulder’ Slim said reaching his hand down his horses shoulder. “That what you figure.”

“Slim that is not...” Jess pushed in.

“Where you figure it?” Slim asked all concern for his horse. “We’re a long way from anywhere” he said worried.

“What” said Jess.

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“We’re a long way from anywhere” Slim said frowning hard. “Sure hate to be stuck out here”. He moved the horse forward, and as Jess looked away toward the Socorro trail, giving it a good hard thump with his shoulder, so it skittered away.

“That does not look good” he said as Jess eyed him extremely suspiciously. “Maybe just move on see if it loosens up.”

Jess narrowed his eyes and glanced at the west trail.

Slim remounted. Jess moved cautiously along behind him then Slim stopped again in five minutes. “Somethin’s wrong” Slim said frowning even more deeply.

“What” said Jess getting tense. “Cain’t see anything wrong with your horse.”

“Just watch” Slim said “He’s droppin’ that right shoulder .”

“Trot him on” Jess finally ordered suspiciously.

Slim trotted the horse quite a few yards by this time on the other side of where the trail went west. Jess stopping almost at the crossroads watched carefully.

“Don’t see nothin’.” Jess said tersely.

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"I still feel it" Slim carefully watched Jess still sitting on his horse at the trail turn and frowning.

"Slim" Jess said staring hard at the west trail.

"You check him, see if you can feel anything" Slim said.

Jess hesitated for several moments which seemed like hours to Slim, before irritation written all over him, he rode up to where Slim was waiting, putting the trail turnoff behind him.

Jess in total annoyance dismounted and went up to Slim's horse. He took his gloves off and started to run his hand down the horse's right shoulder. As he did so Slim touched it with his left spur and the horse went sideways almost slamming into Jess who had to jump back hard out of the way.

"Sure don't like being touched" Slim said.

"Get off" Jess ordered, eyes narrowed.

Slim got off and held the horse's head. As Jess touched the horse again, Slim put his hand around and stuck his thumb into the horse's shoulder. The horse shot sideways nearly jumping on top of Jess again. Jess looked up suspiciously to see Slim patting the horse on its nose and looking concerned.

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"I don't feel anythin' wrong" Jess said through his teeth.

"Maybe just move on and see if it settles" Slim said, all concern "How far away are we from a town?" he deliberately looked eastwards.

"Quite a ways in any direction" Jess muttered nastily.

"Bad place to be stuck with a lame horse" Slim commented innocently "Seen any Indian signs?"

"No" said Jess shortly.

"Just going to trot a ways again" Slim said "See if anything gets better."

Jess narrowed his eyes and frowned but said nothing. He glanced back toward the trail and Slim held his breath for what seemed forever before Jess nodded curtly "Sure" he said.

Slim moved on at a steady trot for quite some distance, glancing over his shoulder to see the Socorro trail turn off retreating into the distance.

Finally Jess moved up beside him and said quite tersely "There ain't nothin' wrong with that horse."

Slim caught his breath as Jess started to pull up and look backwards, so making sure that Jess could not see him do it, Slim tickled his horse up with a spur then held back, the horse tossed his head and dropped slightly on his right front leg. Slim managed to keep it up for about five strides.

Jess frowned but finally said "Maybe nodding his head. Right side."

"Nodding head usually means shoulder" Slim said.

"Could be foot" Jess said. "Coulda stood on a stone. Shoes are all on."

"I reckon it's in his shoulder" Slim said quickly, figuring he could keep a fake shoulder injury going far longer than a fake foot one "seems okay when we move, stiffens when we don't."

"Movin' okay now, ain't noddin' his head at all" Jess said through his teeth. He started to pull up again and fell behind Slim.

"I reckon he got a kick yesterday when you stomped into him down near the border" Slim said just stopping short of accusing.

"I-didn't-touch-your-cursed-horse" Jess muttered pushing up beside Slim.

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“Sure you did” said Slim figuring guilt had worked before “Felt him buckle down when you crashed him, heard the thud.”

“It ain’t so” Jess said through his teeth as Slim gave him a very well feigned look of total disbelief.

Slim managed to keep the trotting and stopping game up until the Socorro trail was out of sight while Jess followed along behind, his expression becoming more and more sour. Slim kept watching carefully for any signs that Jess was working out that he was being literally taken for a ride. Jess was showing signs of considerable annoyance and even suspicion and may even have connected that Slim had foiled him going west but as he did not stop in his tracks and point blank refuse to move on it did not appear he had worked out it was intentional.

And while determinedly pushing north, Slim became quite irrationally annoyed by the fact that Jess still had not worked out he was being taken back to Wyoming because he was wanted there. Jess’s arrival may have only been months in terms of time, but in terms of impact on the people at the relay station it was a lifetime. Jess should have realised that his presence at the Sherman ranch was important to the people who had lived there and that he was not going to be let ride off without an argument.

Andy clearly loved Jess, was even willing to take on Aunt Ella for Jess. Jonsey kept calling him that boy, a sure sign of affection, and Jess knew full well Slim had gone rushing up to Canada after him, for friendship’s sake, even when he knew what Slim thought about his motives for going. Then Slim had risked his own life, and made some hard choices to keep Jess alive from Sam Prado.

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In the months since he had come to work at the Sherman ranch, Jess had also apprehensively returned twice, once in the early days when he left after the visit from his crazy friend Roney and from when he went to Rock Springs. Both times he had been welcomed back, ecstatically by Andy, with warm and slightly sarcastic affection from Jonsey and without even a question from Slim and he still did not seem to understand that he had become important to them.

That Jess cared himself so much in a short time should have made it clear to him that it went both ways but Jess was not good at understanding such things. He said himself that since the war he had never stayed in one spot for even two months. Never stayed long enough to understand what roots really meant.

Slim glanced at Jess grim faced jogging along beside him and regretfully decided thumping would not help. Sooner or later Jess was going to have to figure it out himself. So he contented himself to say nothing and push as hard as he could to put sufficient distance between them and the Socorro trail. Jess apparently learnt by the experience of trying to get a word in when Slim was mad or distracted because he kept quiet this time.

Quite some distance along Slim finally asked again "How far we from a town?"

"Quite a ways" said Jess again "Socorro turn off is back further. Can still go back. Las Vegas Santa Fe trail up ahead. Some ranches maybe eastwards if you want to try trading horses."

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“Good horse” Slim said hastily “Sure hate to trade him off.”

Jess narrowed his eyes but as they rode Slim caught him keeping a fairly close look at the horse's pace as they moved on. He jogged the horse ahead jiggling the animal around when he could get a chance without Jess noticing so it skipped a pace.

“Still think it's in his shoulder.” Slim said, sounding as worried as he could. “Sure glad I ain't alone out here.” He said “A long ways from nowhere to be with a lame horse.

“Stop nigglin' at him” Jess ordered. “Let him move on.”

Slim glanced sideways and pushed the horse forward for a while, then pulled up. “Still seems sore in the shoulder” he said.

Jess gave Slim a really dirty look. “Think so” he said.

“Reckon” said Slim as Jess's eyes narrowed suspiciously. Slim decided he needed to push his point. He pulled up, dismounted then stripped the saddle, making a big point of running his hand all over the animal's back and both shoulders and front legs. “Hope you didn't do anything worse than ripe up a muscle” he told Jess “ when you collected him yesterday.”

“I-didn't-hit-him. I-didn't-get-him-kicked” Jess answered through his teeth. He sat on his horse for a while Slim fussed and then

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conceding that Slim was not going to move dismounted and loosened the cinch on his own horse.

“That shoulder is sure stiff” Slim told Jess and spent a continuous half hour or more carefully rubbing and massaging his horses shoulder while Jess found a rock to lean against, sitting back with his hat over his eyes.

Slim figured Jess was already planning where the next road west was. “You know any water around here?” he called

Jess did not appear to hear him.

Slim called “Jess” he yelled, “water.”

“What” Jess said.

“Water” said Slim.

“None around here” Jess answered from under the hat “Some up ahead some miles, at a waterhole, used to be. Should be right.”

“What about Indians?” Slim asked trying to make sure he sounded worried.

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“What about ‘em”. Jess took a deep breath. “Slim” he started to say.

Slim decided that Jess was again working up to a dangerous conversation. “If you’ve lamed this horse could be a long way home” he interrupted before Jess could start any speeches. “Sure glad he didn’t get sore comin’ down. Would hate to be stuck out in this open with a lame horse.”

Jess sat up and pushed his hat back. He gave him a dirty look. “I-didn’t-lame-your-horse” he said. “But...”

“We need to move. Keep this shoulder loose” Slim said quickly, turning his back to resaddle the horse.

Jess took a deep breath. “Sure” he said.

They found the water hole and decided, at least Slim decided, Jess went along with it, that they should rest there that night. He sent Jess off hunting, making a fuss that he was going to look around for Indian signs.

“Ain’t any” said Jess shortly.

“It’s Arapaho country from here up to the Colorado border ain’t it” Slim asked. “See somethin’ around a water hole if they were in the area.” he said.

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“Ain’t any” said Jess even shorter as he went off to hunt supper.

“Jess I tell you, I’ve sure ridden with some easier tempered fellas in my time” Slim commented.

Jess stopped cold, stood for about a second, then kept on walking. Slim smiled to himself.

Jess ate without talking much and then seemed reasonable easy. For the most part he lay back with his hat over his eyes, uninterested in talking. Apart from becoming very terse with Slim when he suggested that maybe they should keep the fire low in case Indians were around.

“What are you runnin’ scared about?” he asked and then pulled the hat down even further.

Slim would have liked to believe that it was because a few days past Laurel’s departure, Jess had calmed down enough to just decide to go home. But if he knew Jess and he did, it was more likely that Jess’s temper had been replaced by a steely determination not to be the cause of any more trouble or put at risk people he cared about.

This was more or less confirmed by Jess getting very restless after Slim settled down. He kept Slim awake by getting up every few minutes, checking the fire and the picketed horses. Once when he thought Slim was asleep he went over to Slim’s horse and

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carefully ran his hand down its shoulders and legs and muttered to himself.

He came back to sit at the fire and smiled sheepishly when he realised that Slim was awake and watching.

“Just checkin’ to see if he could make it up to Colorado” Jess said.

Slim pushed himself up to sitting position “Need him to make it up to Wyomin’ he said. “ How far to Colorado?”

“Quite a ways” Jess said. He took a deep breath. “You need to be careful around them Colorado towns. Once you get north of Cordossa, it ain’t so bad.” He said “Cordossa’s the worst of ‘em. Knew a fella who got himself shot up, near killed in Cordossa for askin’ the time o’day. Only thing that saved him was the sheriff up there hadn’t figured on killin’ anyone early in the day, and he ain’t that good a shot with a colt. Been that much later and the sherrif was carryin’ a rifle, fella wouldna made it.”

“You don’t say” Slim said drily. “What’s all the preachin’ for. I ain’t no greenhorn kid.. You know I made it down to Mexico without any help. You know I was a lieutenant in the war. Kinda got used to makin’ out for myself.”

“That’s what I mean” said Jess with a very forced patience. “You’re used to bein’ someone. I bet even when you was drivin’ cattle a few years ago, even into Colorado everybody knew who you was. And if they didn’t you only had to say you was Sherman

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from Laramie way an' they sure knew you. Down in them southern towns, won't know you. Makes a difference how things happen when they don't know you."

"Natural folk's know me, family been around a while" Slim said, his patience far less forced than Jess. "Pa used to be quite a hand. Happens when family and you been in one place a while."

"That's what I mean. Know you for bein' somebody when you got roots." Jess said. "First time I went up to Cheyenne with the stage said I was working for the Sherman place. Knew you. Asked how I got on with you. Got told you had a point of view about things. Same up on the Casper end. Or if they didn't know you, knew your Pa or your family."

"So" said Slim with a small smile "How do you get on with me?"

Jess allowed himself a wry smile in return. "Different when you're driftin' particular down south parts of the territory. Like in Cordossa" Jess said. "Get known for t'other reasons when you don't stay in one place for a while. Don't take kindly to drifters havin' a point of view."

"So " said Slim " what's that got to do with you worrin' about me in Colorado towns, like Cordossa."

Jess was silent for a while.

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“So” said Slim.

“Don’t take this wrong” said Jess warily.

“Sure” said Slim drily.

“Like talkin’ last night” Jess said warily “You got a powerful sense of right and wrong Slim an’ I seen you act up somethin’ bad when maybe you think somethin’ ain’t right. Kinda admire it” he admitted. “Kinda like following you in when you figure somethin’ ain’t right, saves me the trouble of workin’ out why.”

“So” said Slim tersely not letting the conversation get side-tracked into anything that could end up with the words thank you.

Jess grimaced at being cut short. He took a deep breath as if to try again. “What you ain’t so good at knowin’,” Jess said “Is sometimes bein’ right don’t matter a hoot. Like when you’re driftin’ or when you’re movin’ around and folks don’t know you’re someone.”

“So” said Slim.

Jess’s eyes narrowed but he opted for preaching over farewells to Slim’s relief. “Like not so long ago I was just ridin’ down the street in a town, no-one knew me. Mindin’ my own business and sheriff starts shootin’ at me. Near enough took my head off.”

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Slim smiled. "It was a bad time" Slim said "Carlin."

"I know why now" Jess said "Point is no-one asked me if I was anythin' to do with him. Just started shootin'. Easiest thing was to turn and get. Easy for me" he said "Reckon you'd o'wanted to talk. Figured shootin' at a man for ridin' down the street wasn't right. Maybe knowin' you was Slim Sherman they'd o'talked but not knowin', right or wrong they'd shoot and knowin' you, you'd shoot back"

"How often is that goin' to happen?" Slim asked derisively.

"Pretty regular" Jess answered easily. "You know just that same day I was lyin' in the sun watchin' a bird fly over and some fella stuck a gun at my head."

"You were trespassin'." Slim told him amused at the memory.

"You were right" Jess agreed "Would'na done you much good if I'd figured to shoot back, bein' right though. Course if I'd knowed then you was Mr Sherman of Sherman Ranch well maybe I'd have been more respectful."

"I don't think so" said Slim

"You're right" said Jess grinning.

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They rode on from first light next morning. Jess seemed to spend a large part of the night moving around, waking Slim quite a bit when he did it. Neither was in a particularly good mood the next morning. Jess complained of no food but a few apples and what was left from the night before's hunting. Slim suggested they could stock up in Colorado trail towns and got a very testy response.

Jess was even more testy as he asked about Slim's horse and Slim decided pushing it was not a good idea so he said that the horse seemed fine.

"Must have been all that rubbin' fixed him" Slim said.

"Must a been" Jess agreed dryly.

They rode on northwards, with Slim realising that the Santa Fe trail was coming up and wondering what he could do to stop Jess going west again. After that it was a fairly clear run to Colorado where there was another large mountain range between Jess and westward but he was pretty sure that Jess calmer than he had been was not going to fall for any temper, or risks to his horse.

So Slim was going to have to fall back on the one thing he knew for certain. That he knew Jess and Jess would not desert in the face of danger. All he had to do was find a danger that would convince Jess he needed to keep going north.

Jess was not too convinced about Indians but it was Slim's best bet for the moment.

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Well into the morning they stopped at one of the few water holes. Slim was not unhappy to see that the water hole was surrounded by hoof marks from unshod horses.

“Recent.” he said bending over to examine the tracks. “Best we don’t hang around. Never know.”

“If it is Indians we don’t bother them, no reason to bother us” Jess said even more testily than before.

“Less someone else has been botherin’ ‘em and they’re mad” Slim argued. “Best get movin’.”

“You’re getting’ awful nervous” Jess commented doubtfully and although Slim made efforts to move fast, Jess contented himself to remain at steady jog.

Slim tried three times to suggest there could be a problem and three times Jess narrowed his eyes and asked Slim why he was getting edgy.

Finally they saw a cloud of dust at some distance and Slim was just congratulating himself that something was going right, and it was Indians when Jess pulled up and pointed. Through the dust there were about seven horses, coming from the general direction of the water hole, loose.

“Mustangs” said Jess amused.

“Mustangs” agreed Slim far from it.

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They rode carefully all day. Jess seemed to have got over his introversion. He talked fairly easily, sharing parts of his past that Slim was surprised he was so open about, because they were things that were frankly disturbing, some stories of the worst places he had been and some of the worst trouble he had been in. Certainly he was sharing things that when he had come close to being asked in the last few months, he had shied away from.

Most were told with a dry disregard for offering any justification to why Jess had done what he had done and been what he had been. At first Slim was confused at why Jess had started to talk, especially as many of the stories were introduced as being something that would really shock Aunt Ella, ruin Andy's high opinion of him or intentionally insisting that at some point Jess had kept company with or crossed every wanted man in several territories.

Slim finally realised that Jess, after spending some days riding north when he intended to ride west, had calmed down from the sheer embarrassment he was feeling at having been made such a fool by Laurel but was truly locked into separating himself from the Sherman connection. And therefore he was doing his best to ease the break. Taking the view that the worse Slim knew about him the less likely he was to argue when Jess did get around to saying goodbye.

The trouble for Jess, if only he knew it, was that the more he talked about his life on the bad side, the more Slim was hearing a story of a man who in the face of all odds had maintained a sense of decency and honesty and often misplaced loyalty. But even when Jess was misplacing that loyalty Slim found it as something to respect. Slim could easily recognise that Jess's sense of loyalty

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to almost any one who had remotely offered him friendliness or assistance was easily the source of most of the concerns and troubles he brought on himself but it was also the reason Jess had not been dragged down to the level of the bad men and outlaws he was clearly trying to convince Slim had happened.

Slim recalled the old Judge Cade accusing Jess of having a nasty streak of honesty in him and he had to agree the old reprobate knew what he was talking about. Jess did have a streak of honesty in him, one that had remained in the face of almost every attempt from others and himself to get rid of it. Slim found himself wishing Jess was aware he was being taken home because he would like to have pointed out to him that his stories, far from convincing Slim to let him go off declaring good riddance, were doing the opposite.

Slim had lived through a war. A war where men had been sent to undertake fighting and face things for which most were unprepared. As a friend to some and then as an officer he was a first-hand witness to the destruction that facing the worst in themselves had led some men, too many men. Slim had never had any doubts about his role in the war but as many a soldier who returned home he had things buried inside himself that he did not want to acknowledge, let alone share. What Jess's story was doing was offering him a sense of relief that someone could come through the carnage with a good soul battered, bruised and rough but still intact. What he was hearing from Jess was something that justified some of the worst things he himself had faced.

Not that Jess would be very thrilled to hear that at the moment.

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Nor did knowing just where Jess had come from, make Slim any less concerned that Jess needed to return home. All men had a breaking point. There was a good chance that throwing a way his chance to belong on the whim of an amoral women could be Jess's.

At which point a vision of Laurel de Wall as he had last seen her flashed in front of Slim's eyes. He caught his breath, and cursed her for what she had done to Jess and for getting into his thoughts with simply a look and a promise, and then he cursed himself because he knew what she was, and still she was there haunting him. Slim deliberately pushed the vision of her away, tried to bury it with his worst memories of war and made every effort concentrate on the problem of Jess.

Slim did wonder if... when he got Jess home, how Jess would deal with having spilled most of what his life had been like. Resentment perhaps, or maybe finally understanding that he could trust someone.

None of which mattered if Slim could not get Jess home.

And far from getting easier, as they headed toward the Santa Fe trail, it was getting harder. As they rode along, with Jess once again lapsing into silence, presumably to give Slim time to digest the full extent of his tales, Slim considered his options. They appeared to be convincing Jess that he was needed; convincing Jess Slim would not get back without him; following Jess when he turned west until he gave up, or finally admitting that he had every intention of dragging Jess home and taking a chance Jess would see sense.

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The last one being the least likely to succeed.

They stopped for the night near another water hole that had some grazing around for the horses. Slim was more than pleased when they found the remains of a recent camp fire, almost at the spot they camped. He wandered around searching for signs of Indians moving and started pushing the possibilities of danger from the Indian risk, making a fuss about how close the Indians could be, while Jess standing watching him made exasperated grunts in reply.

Jess finally went over to the old campfire and started kicking around. As Slim became more enthusiastic about the risks Jess bent down and sifted through the remains of the ashes. He finally stood up holding a burnt empty can "Bean eating Indians?" he said drily. "Hardcase what is with you runnin' scared?" he asked suspiciously.

Slim decided any explanations were dangerous and just shrugged. "How far to the Santé Fe trail?" he asked abruptly.

"Quite a ways" said Jess his voice very dry.

"When?" Slim asked annoyed.

"Tomorrow" Jess said even drier.

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Slim got some sleep that night but Jess managed to disturb him on several occasions. Jess had talked himself out and his restlessness only showed itself by wandering, and then some twisting and turning.

So much for a man who claimed he could sleep anywhere Slim thought when he was awakened for the third time. Slim wondered what was bothering Jess more, having Laurel crash his dreams or feeling he was walking out on the only chance he had to find a home. He shut his eyes and was about to curse Jess's stupidity on both scores when a vision of Laurel DeWalt's knowing soulless eyes flashed before him and he caught his breath.

They finally made the Santa Fe trail toward the middle of the next morning. Slim waited for Jess to start the thank you speech and when it did not happen was all for riding straight north. Jess just shrugged and said he was riding into Las Vegas, a New Mexican town that was something of a journey break for many travellers using the Santa Fe trail to move west. Slim supposed that Jess had considered the possibilities of Slim refusing to say goodbye on the trail especially as other attempts to do that had somehow been foiled. He had therefore decided that telling Slim he was staying in a town was likely to be more successful than saying he was drifting off and riding away.

Jess headed toward the town before Slim could argue and all Slim could do was follow.

Slim mused over ideas about perhaps convincing the local law that he was a bounty hunter, no.... special marshal, no rewards involved, and needed help to arrest a prisoner. He thought there

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was a chance that he could pull it off, depending on the size of the law enforcement in Las Vegas. Jess would howl and fight but not lethally, and these days Slim had a pretty good idea of how Jess fought. The problem was not getting Jess contained, he decided, it would be keeping him that way all the way to Wyoming. Only something to use as a last resort. He just had to be ready to take advantage of whatever opportunities arose.

As Slim pondered all the ways he could physically drag Jess back home, they rode into Las Vegas, a town established as one of the stops along the Santa Fe trail. It was a reasonable size town with porched adobe Spanish style buildings lining a couple of streets. It was not a sleepy town however, As Slim looked around, he realised there were wagons and every other conceivable form of transport were packed around the town and loose hobbled horses and bullocks were grazing in any free spaces around the town. There were some people camped near some of the wagons, and more lounging around the streets and under the Spanish archways of many of the buildings. Most gave the impression that they had been hanging around for some time.

Jess also noticed and looked at Slim with surprise then narrowed his eyes. "Busy" he muttered.

"Something goin' on" Slim answered hoping for any excuse to keep Jess moving that just might happen.

They went to leave the horses at the livery stable but a very flustered and grumpy attendant said there was no room and then bustled off after telling them all they could do was hitch the horses to a space at the corral fence and he would provide some grain.

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Jess looked at Slim “Mighty hospitable” he said sarcastically. Slim shrugged not really unhappy about it.

They unsaddled the horses, watered them, found a small space to hitch near a fence where they could be grained without some other animal stealing it and then drifted up the street.

“Beer and a steak” Jess said.

Slim nodded but it turned out to be harder to find a meal than they thought. There were quite a number of cafes and saloons in the town and all were packed.

“Somethin’s up” Jess said, and Slim noted the hint of frustration in his voice. “Town’s burstin’.”

They finally found a saloon at the end of the town that had enough space to get inside and a sign saying meals were being served.

After considerable pushing just to get near the bar a grumpy, busy and far from friendly barman took an order for meals and snapped out the cost.

Jess scrapped his pockets for money, finally pulling out a handful of change and some very crumbled dollar notes.

“That all you got?” Slim asked taking note.

Jess shrugged and ordered two beers, scowling as the busy barman sloshed beer over the counter. He picked up his beer and walked off, pushing his way through the crowded room to try and find space at a table in a far corner. A nice space to have a private conversation Slim noted, where Jess could say his farewell speech as best he could but the place was crowded enough for Slim not to make a public scene.

“Score points for you Jess” Slim thought annoyed. He wondered how much Jess was suspecting Slim was trying to foil the farewell speech.

Slim racked his brains to think of ways to stop the conversation that was inevitably going to happen if he sat down at the table with Jess. He had to break into his \$5 note to pay for the meal, taking his time, slowly counted the change as Jess found a table in a rather smoky corner of the room.

As Jess sat at the table he had found tapping his fingers impatiently, Slim stayed well away. He sipped his beer and after three tries at speaking to someone in the crowd was able to get into a conversation with a bearded rather dirty young man, whose boots looked worse for wear and who was slowly sipping on his beer as if it was his last. To Slim’s amusement he spoke with a decided English accent.

Slim glanced toward where Jess was sitting at the table, showing every indication of a man who had worked himself up to a difficult

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conversation and was getting very frustrated when it did not happen. Slim turned his back ignoring Jess and focused his attention on the young Englishman, which as far as he was concerned was one of the best conversations he had in some time.

The young man was happy to talk. He said he was trying to make his way toward Arizona and some of the silver strikes he had heard there, which as he said was the route that most of the people in the town were doing, but nobody in the town was going anywhere.

The trail west, the young man morosely told Slim was not passable, and it didn't look like being passable for some time. A rock slide at Glorietta had left the road completely blocked and as far as the young man was concerned people in Las Vegas were doing everything they could not to fix it until either the travellers money ran out or the food in the town did.

Slim just looked at him, a grin all over his face. "Trail west is blocked?" he asked not keeping the pleasure out of his voice.

"Been blocked for ten days" said the young man. "Stuck here. Sleeping rough, no rooms here even if I did have money. No more money nothing left. No jobs here.' And the saloons stopped free food about a week ago. Stuck in this god forsaken country" he concluded bitterly.

"I don't think its godforsaken" Slim told him happily.

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“What evidence do you have, God even knows where this country is?” said the young man bitterly.

“There was a rock slide on the western trail” Slim answered. “Just when I was thinking I needed a miracle. Proves God is on my side.”

“The rock slide was caused by a ground tremor” the young man pointed out.

“You take your miracles your way. I’ll take mine my way.” Slim replied nodding in Jess’s direction.

“Why do you need a miracle?” asked the young man curiously.

“To move a mountain” Slim said. “A goldurn stubborn one.”

“You don’t look like a man in need of a miracle.” the young man commented looking Slim up and down.

“You don’t look like a guardian angel.” Slim replied.

The young man’s eyes narrowed suspiciously but when Slim offered to buy him another beer and lunch, he accepted thanking Slim profusely and positively beaming at Slim.

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Which was not Jess's reaction when Slim brought the young man over to the table, and Slim sat him down to tell Jess the good news that the west road was blocked.

All things considered Jess took it well. His hand cracked on the table and his eyes narrowed and there was a small tremor at his lip. He started to say about three things before he finally shook his head and asked "Is that what you was talkin' about at the bar?"

"Mostly we were talking about God" said the young man.

Jess looked surprised "When did you get religion?" he asked Slim

"Been thinking about it recently." Slim said drily "Where you come from?" he asked the young man, who immediately launched into an intense and homesick description of his home town of Bristol, and the horrors of a steerage class boat trip to America. Jess raised his eyes and swallowed hard and Slim leaned forward intensely interested in the young man's story. Slim kept the young Englishman talking through the long wait for a meal and while they ate. Jess alternatively sipped at his beer and stared into it then frowned deeply.

Slim watched Jess carefully all through the meal. Mostly Jess just ate fast, raising his eyes because there was no way he could get a word in through the young Englishman's descriptions of the food on ships from Bristol in steerage. Not that Jess was ever off his food so that was no indication of his state of mind Slim thought. Finally Jess could clearly not stand it any longer. He stood up offering to get more beer, maybe needing to get more beer, and pushed his

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way through to the bar. From the long conversation Jess had at the bar with a group of men who looked like miners, and the sour expression on his face, the conversation clearly confirmed the road was closed.

And to Slim's relief it was Jess who started them moving. He finished his beer then came over and said he would get the horses. As soon as Jess left, Slim thanked the rather confused young man, telling him he may have helped save a life, and then pressed his last three loose dollars into his hand.

The young man was clearly embarrassed "I was not looking for charity" he said.

"Gratitude" Slim said as he left.

Slim decided he would leave Jess get the horses and pay for them, keeping Jess broke might just add to his cause. He went over to the general store where he bought some supplies which he was still purchasing when he saw Jess come up to the store with the horses. So he called to him to pay for the supplies which he did narrowing his eyes and scrapping a few more of his last crumbled dollars.

"How much you got left?" Jess asked.

"20 dollar note and few quarters" Slim said which was the honest truth. "You?"

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“Some dollars in change,” Jess replied. “You want to get out of here” he said glancing around at the crowded street of people hanging around doing nothing.

“Sure thing” Slim said enthusiastically. He mounted and rode out of town, heading north before Jess could start arguing. “That sure was an interestin’ story from the young fella at lunch” he said.

Jess gave him a dirty look and Slim smiled to himself.

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They rode on northwards. Slim thinking to keep a few fires hot started to talk about Indians.

Jess pulled up sharp. “Shut up about the cursed injuns” he said.

Slim pulled a face. “Sure” said Slim.

They moved north up the Santa Fe trail, passing few riders and wagons who were less than thrilled to hear about rock slides and finally moved off the trail as it turned east.

“You sure you don’t want to go back through Texas?” Slim asked Jess.

“No” Jess replied shortly.

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“Kansas?” Slim asked

“Been there” Jess answered shortly “thought you was in a hurry to get home.”

“Just askin’ said Slim. “ See any in...”

“Shut up” said Jess.

Jess was still planning on west and feeling completely frustrated at not being able to go in that direction, Slim thought to himself. Jess had been heading west when he had first come to the Sherman ranch and never offered an explanation why.

“What is it about west?” Slim wondered. Then nodded as he knew the answer because he knew Jess. Jess was going west because it wasn’t east or south. Jess had been east and south and all he had found was trouble and there was no going back from it so he was heading west to try and avoid it, futile though the hope might be. Slim wondered why Jess had not figured all he was going to find westward was more trouble, unless he could stop being who he was and then he was lost.

They rode on northwards, with Jess fairly quiet but not making any attempt or showing any interest in leaving. Throughout the rest of the ride he made no effort to explain himself or start making speeches. Mostly he rode on with a quiet wariness that gave away nothing of what he was thinking which worried Slim. He knew Jess well enough to recognise it was one of Jess’s dangerous

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moods but there was nothing he could do or say that broke through his quietness, though he tried on several occasions but the only response he got was very short murmured agreement. As they came near the border between Colorado and New Mexico, Slim thought he recognised again in Jess the signs of tension that he was planning farewell speeches. Once into Colorado with a mountain range to the west, Slim thought his chances of keeping Jess northward bound were good but they still had some distance to go.

He racked his brain for anything else he could do until they were safely away from westward trails. He was contemplating the problem for quite a distance when Jess cut into his thoughts and told him sharply to pull up.

“What? Slim asked doing as he was told.

“You see that dust cloud” Jess said pointing westward.

“Maybe someone just moving” Slim answered straining his eyes
“Mustangs” he suggested.

“Sure” Jess answered sarcastically.

“Okay” said Slim keeping his cool.

“Move eastways” Jess said sharply

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“Sure“ said Slim heading north east before Jess had any other suggestions. As he moved on he turned back to Jess “Been tellin’ you to keep a watch out for Arapaho.” he said.

“Don’t know they is Arapaho, don’t know if they is Arapaho they is lookin’ for trouble” Jess pointed out.

“It’s Indians, like I’ve been tellin’ you.” Slim started to say.

“Sure Mr Sherman, you is right they’re around” Jess agreed sarcastically “Must make a fella feel real good about himself bein’ right so often” he said.

“ I’m bein’ careful” said Slim defensively.

“You’re lookin’ for trouble afore it happens” Jess said “Trust me trouble will find ya soon enough without lookin’ for it where it’s not.”

“Don’t hurt to be wary in this country” Slim muttered.

“Shut up” said Jess

They rode northwards veering east for quite some time. Slim kept an eye out for signs to the west, where he could see dust clouds, the occasion flying of birds high in the sky and just a hint of movement high in the ranges. All of which Slim kept pointing out to Jess who glowered every time he said something.

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Slim insisted to Jess's annoyance that they moved as fast as they could, that they kept fires low and took turns keeping watch, making sure the horses were close.

Jess became steadily more irritated. When they were still not quite at the Colorado border as the mountains and rocks started to rise above them, Jess finally lost it enough to stop and demand what was wrong with Slim, what he was trying to pull and why he was seeing Indians at every rock. Jess mockingly asking what he was so scared about.

It was with some satisfaction that Slim pointed to a tall rocky outlet where two Indians were sitting watching down the trail they rode.

Jess cursed under his breath. Slim was uncertain whether it was at the Indians or at him for being right.

"We need to move" Jess ordered. "Just play it quiet. Keep going and don't do anything stupid."

Slim nodded then he looked up at the highlighted against the skyline Indians.

"Thank you Lord" he said under his breath.

They rode on, harder than they had. Stopping long enough to graze and rest horses and stay out of sight. They sighted a few more Indians but managed to stay clear. Slim was more than

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happy to see them as long as he and Jess were not turned away from riding north.

“Should be okay when we reach Colorado” Jess said. “Just keep on going.”

Slim smiled to himself. One more territory between them and home. He looked over to his left where the Rocky mountains towered high above them covered in cloud at the top. Almost an impenetrable wall between them and the way west.

Slim smiled God and nature were on his side.

Jess for his part spent rest of the day giving Slim instructions on how to get through the territory which did nothing to ease Slim's concerns he had an escape west route planned.

“You do know I made it down to the border without needin' instructions on what was hidden behind every rock?” Slim was finally driven to asking.

“You followed me” Jess swallowed hard and his jaw sort of tremoured as if thinking about the trip down was still too painful “an' Laurel “ he said. “Took the easy route for her. She struggled with the ride” he said, his voice rasping.

“Or said she did” Slim pointed out.

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“Point is that route took us around trouble, on the other side of the mountain” Jess said “This route must be how DeWalt and his friend got down ahead I guess. This way is faster but you got to know what you're doin'.”

“DeWalt seemed to make it no trouble” Slim commented.

“You stop to ask him?” Jess answered.

“I guess not” Slim conceded. “Still don't figure why you are so worried about stoppin' in those towns”

“Well just remember when you're driftin' through you ain't somebody” Jess said. “And don't think you go into some place like Cordossa and get yourself into trouble I'll come runnin' to get you out because I'm tellin' you I ain't. You been warned” he threatened.

“I reckon you would” Slim told Jess.

Jess snorted “Don't you even think about tryin' to prove it” he snarled.

They rode on in not companionable silence.

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“Andy sure thought you were someone when you came, even if you were driftin’.” Slim said after a little while. “By the time knew you a few hours I figured that too. “

“You threatened to shoot me once and beat me up before you did, cause you figured Andy weren’t safe with me” Jess answered tersely. “Figured you was right then” he said pointedly.

“Reckon the odds were I was” Slim muttered.

“An’ I reckon if you had been right, woulda been the second time that day, you was in big trouble for bein’ right. Jess agreed.

“Reckon you could take me?” Slim asked wondering if for once he was going to get a straight answer from Jess to such a question.

Jess hesitated “Reckon” Jess muttered finally as if forced to admit something he did not want too.

“Reckon’ I’d make a good fight of it” Slim answered a touch aggressively.

“Reckon, which is why I ain’t tryin’.” Jess agreed. “Which is why bein’ right ain’t everythin’.” He shook his head. “Like you was tellin’ me about vigilantizing down Kansas, with that fella Mort Corey after the war.”

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“Yeah” Slim asked “What’s that got to do with Colorado trail towns?”

“You figured it was the right thing. But risky business” Jess said
“Even when you is right.

“Mort is a good friend” Slim said “Nothin’ happened account of it.”

“More luck than anythin’ else” Jess said. “Chasin’ them Bannister brothers is risky work. I know.”

“You figure I shouldn’t have gone” Slim said “You wouldn’t have.”

“Figure if you figured it was right, I’d have followed with you” Jess admitted “which is why I’m sayin’ keep out of them towns.”

Slim smiled. “There are a lot of towns that don’t know me” Slim said. “Why you so worried about south Colorado ones.”

“Spent some time around them towns in south Colorado” Jess said
“before I come to Wyomin’. I know how they work.”

“In Cordossa?” Slim asked.

“Nope” Jess shook his head “Others.”

“Doin’ what?” Slim asked.

“Tried homesteadin’ for about two weeks before we got run out by the fella who figured the range was his” Jess said.

Slim started to interrupt but Jess cut him short.

“Yeah if it had been you, you’d have fought it out because he wasn’t right doin’ it. Tried that too. In a court of law. Know what it got me?” he said

“I’m guessin’ not a homestead” Slim asked smiling slightly.

“Guessin’ right” Jess agreed grimly. “Spent some time gambling; around Colorado towns after that. Figured someone in Colorado owed me somethin’. One thing I seen was how bad them towns are hit in this drought” Jess said. “Hang around ‘em and you see ‘em doin’ it bad. Hit pretty bad when I was around afore. Folks make do as best they can. Stranger come to take, they take first. Start figurin’ as it gets worse they take a stranger afore they know if he is gonna try taken’ ‘em.”

“They didn’t take you.” Slim pointed out.

“Don’t care so much about bein’ right or wrong.” Jess said eyeing Slim sideways to watch his reaction. “Had a pal, didn’t care so much. Supposed to watch his back. He watches mine.”

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“What happened to your pal?” Slim asked curiously.

“Pete Morgan” said Jess shortly.

“You sure can pick your company” Slim said grinning.

“Your Aunt Ella's right.” Jess said “Fella like me doesn't get invited to polite company so much. More like to find the other kind. One's that get a fella into trouble.”

“After that Bishop's wife I ain't sure the polite ones aren't the worst trouble” Slim said with some feeling.

Jess gave him a dirty look.

“Had to bust him out of jail once when he got into an argument with a sheriff about disturbin' the peace, when all he'd been doin' was singin' in a bar and the sheriff wanted to fine him 200 dollars, most of what we had won between us.”

“Wasn't that risky” Slim asked “ Bustin' a fella out of jail.”

“Easiest thing in the world” Jess admitted “None of them lawman got the guts to lock up any one real dangerous an' they don't waste money on locks.”

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“mmm” said Slim “Wouldn't pay on principal” he commented.
“Even if I had it”

“You wouldn't pay I would” said Jess. “Pete hung in to argue it with the judge. Judge wanted a cut and doubled the fine.”

“That is not right” Slim said.

“Yeah it weren't right and it weren't no use arguin'.” Jess said.”
Pete thanked me real fine for it, next town on was ...”

“When he busted you over the head and stole what you won” Slim said. “What's it all got to do with me and keepin' out of south Colorado trail towns?” Slim asked again.

“Don't go rushin' into 'em and getting' all het up about what's right and what's wrong” Jess said. “Last time I was with a fella who did that all I got out of it was a broken skull.”

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They rode into Colorado, watching the high mountains to the west and the wide grasslands to the east.

“Sure is some country here” said Slim “Even smells different to down south. Air is something.”

“Always thought so” Jess answered slowly and Slim thought hesitantly.

“How come you know this country so well?” Slim asked and was sure there was problem when Jess took a deep long hard breath. “Not rustlin’ cattle or horse thievin’ or such” Slim asked good humouredly determined to show Jess that none of the stories he had heard in the last few days had any effect.

Jess gave Slim an uncomfortable and pained glance, and it occurred to Slim this one must be bad. Finally Jess answered calmly “You know I rode dispatch, end of the war, General Carter. Was workin down here, afore he went north and ... well you know what finished him. Massacre” Jess said “Got to see Major Prescott in action down here. Thought highly of him” he said.

Slim nodded wondering what was coming. “You never did tell me” Slim asked casually “How a Texas boy was riding dispatch for the army? When? Must have been almost before the war ended. “

“No” Jess agreed. “I didn’t.”

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In fact he had been completely closemouthed about it. Even the story of his helter skelter ride to get help when Major Prescott and Slim were defending the relay station from attack from the Indian Yellow Knife, in those first weeks Jess had spent at the ranch had not inspired him to add details about his dispatch rider days. In the days after the attack Andy had asked Jess point blank and Jess had done a masterly job of avoiding explanations, covering his responses by explaining how highly he had thought of Major Prescott.

Whatever it was Slim recognised was bad.

Jess looked at Slim intently. His eyes narrowed and the jaw tremoured again, and then his free hand kneaded on his thigh. All of which Slim noted. Jess was so tight his horse feeling the tension skittered across the road. He took his time getting it settled. Slim said nothing. He knew the signs and he had heard enough bad stories from Jess's life in the last few days to be prepared for whatever was coming, if Jess decided he wanted to answer.

Jess finally decided he would answer. He sought of half cleared his throat and coughed.

"Oh boy Jess" Slim thought to himself "You sure thinkin' this one will get you on the road west, with me pleased as all get put to see you go."

"Started ridin' dispatch near enough to before war ended" Jess told him flat voiced. "Wasn't like they expected dispatch riders would survive long, so offered it to any war prisoners who didn't

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want to stay on in camps. Nothin' was worse than that, so figured why not."

"Looks like you survived" Slim said. He frowned slightly "You couldna ridden that long?" He took a deep breath "Wasn't that usually a sign on for years?" he asked and for the life of him could not keep the accusation out of his voice.

"Yessir lieutenant Sheridan" Jess said nastily recognising the accusation. "I quit" he said defiantly.

"They just let you?" Slim asked and he wished he could have softened the question and couldn't.

"Never asked them" Jess sneered. "How you feel about deserters now?" he asked.

Slim took a hard deep breath. "I figure if a man gives his word then he's bound to keep it. Even when it gets rough." He answered knowing even trying to lie about how he felt would give Jess every excuse to leave.

"Figured you would say that" said Jess darkly.

"Likely to be any trouble over it?" Slim asked seriously.

"Never know" said Jess.

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Jess watched, waiting for a reaction, expecting a reaction from Slim, a bad one. The sort of reaction that would give him an opening to say thanks and goodbye.

In truth, it took Slim every bit of self-control not to react. If he knew Jess, Jess knew him. Slim was keenly aware of Jess watching to see that reaction. He pulled his hat down hard on his head not looking at Jess. Jess making an audible snap of his teeth, rode forward and pushed past.

So Slim rode behind, his hat down hard over his eyes. Jess said nothing more but the hunch of his shoulders suggested to Slim who knew him well just how much he was hurting. They rode on hardly together, in fact Jess riding so far ahead, he could have easily turned west and Slim could have done nothing to stop him.

Still wouldn't go without saying thank you Slim figured. Even when Jess had done everything he could to make sure Slim would be glad to see the back of him.

Jess was so far ahead in fact he had to yell to get Slim's attention when he stopped and dismounted at a water hole, some hours later. As Slim rode up saying nothing because he was not sure what he could say that that would not provoke Jess into doing something he did not want to happen, Jess pointed to sure signs of unshod ponies, around a water hole and still warm fire.

"Arapaho?" Slim asked which was the first word that had past between them for quite some time.

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Jess bent over and stirred the ground slightly then picked up a broken arrow shaft with some marks “Looks like it” he said shortly.

Slim got off his horse, ground hitching and started to look around.

Jess shrugged and took both horses to the water hole examining the disturbed ground around it while the horses drank. “Lot of tracks” he called to Slim.

The signs were that there were a large number of Indians who seemed to be moving north eastward.

“Could get dangerous if we run into them, reckon to many to be a huntin’ bunch.” Jess said as he brought the horses back “Like we better get movin’ north west. Ride carefully” Jess ordered.

Slim agreed hastily. He mounted up and as Jess led away Slim saluted slightly in the direction of the Arapaho tracks. At least they would still be heading north, and Jess was not likely to try and leave before he was sure the Indian signs were quiet. And the further north they got the bigger that wall of mountains between them and westward paths.

“God was still on his side,” Slim thought “And maybe the Indian nations as well.”

They rode on silently until nearly nightfall, nothing said between them and Jess as tense and tight as a rope stretched to breaking

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point. Jess stopped as the darkness started to fall around them, indicating by a sweep of his hand they should camp.

“Maybe better campin’ up higher” Slim said quite seriously. “See any movement eastwards.”

Jess looked at him darkly “You still want to camp with a deserter?” he said pushing hard.

Slim recognised the expression on Jess’s face, that hurt almost fragile expression, that was Jess at his most vulnerable; and toughest.

For a few minutes while Slim contemplated Jess admitting to one of the things that broke every code Slim believed in, Slim was just tempted to ride up and straight confront Jess with desertion, of everything and anyone who ever tried to help him. To demand if that was all, he ever knew how to do.

Except that is what Jess would do if Slim pushed. Mutter out thank you and farewell and leave.

Which was when Slim remembered that Jess was doing his best to make what he believed was the upcoming breakup easier. And if he knew Jess which he did, Jess knew him and could hit on probably the one sin, desertion, that just might make Slim be glad to see him go.

And yet Jess would still be bitterly hurt if it worked.

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Jess not getting a reaction from Slim silently turned his horse up the trail toward a clearing he could just make out higher up the side of the rising Colorado mountains.

Slim following him considered that he should not be surprised that Jess admitted to desertion to push Slim away because if there was a man who knew just how bad a deed desertion was it would have to be Jess. If there was one thing Slim had worked out from Jess's talking the last few days it was that Jess did have a long history of desertion; being deserted.

Jess was trouble. There was no denying it, it came with him, it followed him and anyone near him was going to be caught up in it. As a result in one way or another he had been deserted by almost everybody he cared about. Or they had not cared enough about him to make any effort to get him stay when he decided that they were safer without him.

Which was what Jess was doing now. The difference being that this time Slim had no intention of letting him go.

Slim smiled to himself wryly, deciding this was perhaps the one time that not hiding what he was feeling was a good thing. Jess finally stopped at the clearing, dismounting from his horse and with barely restrained tension yanked the cinch undone. The horse usually an even tempered animal caught his tension and pulled away slightly backing into Slim's horse.

"Be careful" Slim snapped. "You want to get this fella kicked again."

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Jess making another audible hissing noise but pulled the saddle of his horse more gently, and patted it as he slipped a rope over its neck to tether it for the night.

Slim smiled to himself. "Figure we're far into in Colorado?" Slim asked.

"Figure" said Jess "We're well past the border" Jess mumbled "Slim..." he started to say.

"Well you know the country" Slim interrupted deliberately.

"Yeah" said Jess turning his back, almost rigid.

"You're a fool Jess" muttered Slim angrily under his breath.

Slim slammed his saddle on the ground and move away to picket his horse. When he came back Jess was bending over the ground putting a fire together. He did not look up. Slim stood over him. "Okay, so you like using the word deserter. You want to push me, you know how to" he snapped not feigning anger "What do you want Jess? You want me to ask, you want to just tell me or leave it hang so you got some way out, next time you want to go wanderin'."

Jess looked at him, relieved or annoyed or uncertain. All three.

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“You don’t want to leave any more than we want you to leave” Slim thought.

But just as he was about to answer Jess seemed to remember the reason he was talking was to make Slim mad enough not to argue about him going. So he shrugged and looked away and Slim just thumped his knee and also turned away to get the coffee pot and muttered under his breath about stubborn fools who didn’t have the sense to know when they were well off.

After they set up the camp that night, Jess was still keeping himself to himself and Slim was mad enough at him to let him do it.

The only talk between them was Slim making decisions about not hunting anything because if the noise of the shot and keeping a small fire for coffee and heating beans, from which the only response he got from Jess was a muttered “Yes sir looteneant Sherman sir.”

Which was once too much when as they were settling down to sleep, Slim said they better make sure the fire stayed low and Jess muttered again “ Yes sir looteneant Sherman sir”

“What’s with this lieutenant thing?” Slim demanded.

“You was one of them officers, all dressed up with stripes on your pants wasn’t you?” Jess asked clearly doing his best to burn all bridges. “Givin’ orders like there was no tomorrow , ridin’ when rest

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of us was clawin' through mud knee deep. Eatin' when was nothin' for t'others."

"Cut it out Jess" Slim snapped. "I earned that commission and you know it."

Jess snorted.

"Some of us just knew we had to be responsible" Slim snorted again. "Commissioned in the field. Earned the stripes, walked as much as any man."

Jess snorted again.

"Found out pretty early in it, mud ain't any less deep under a lieutenant's boots, wind ain't any less cold, rain ain't any less wet because you're wearing stripes." Slim persisted.

"You had boots did you?" said Jess drily.

Slim lay awake for quite some time. He could tell by the sound of Jess's breathing that he was not sleeping any easier than he had on the other nights of the long ride.

After a while Slim called "Hey Jess."

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Jess did not answer and Slim said “Hey Jess” again.

“What” said Jess finally.

“Can I ask you somethin' without you getting' real mad?” Slim asked.

Jess grunted.

“Well” said Slim.

“Guess” Jess finally conceded.

“Somethin' you said the other day.” Slim asked. “You joined up for the war before you had to. Why?”

“Does it matter?” Jess asked his voice gruff.

“Nope. Wondered” said Slim. “You know seein' what the war was about. It ain't like your family had... an' I never knew a man, north or south who cared less about what a man looked like than you.”

Jess was silent for a while “Why did you fight?” Jess asked perhaps stalling. “Not like you was from east, had to...could have stayed out west and not hardly knowed it was happenin'.”

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Slim turned toward the small fire where he could see Jess leaning back against his saddle not remotely asleep. "Thought it was the right thing" Slim explained "Thought highly of Mr Lincoln. Figure when you think somethin' was right, what ain't right is to let other fellas do the shootin' and dyin' for you."

"Okay" Jess said shortly and Slim wondered if he was avoiding answering the question.

"Figured the same" said Jess finally. "Figured sayin' I was from Texas meant bein' from Texas and you don't stand back and watch while others ... It was pretty wild down there when the thing started. I was ridin' with a friendgambler called Dixie Howard."

"Heard of him" Slim said darkly.

"Figures you would" Jess answered grimly. "He figured I was crazy goin' back but sometimes when somethin' makes you what you are you...owe."

"Figures" said Slim thinking even if Jess could not be sure how to spell loyalty he could write the book on it.

Jess grunted and deliberately turned away.

Slim lay awake for a while thinking. "Hey Jess" he called.

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“What” muttered Jess clearly not asleep.

“You ever thing maybe we were firing at each other?” he asked.

“Maybe” Jess finally replied “I was firin’ at a lot of people”.

“Me too” said Slim.

“Figured” said Jess.

Slim grunted, lay awake for a while “Hey Jess” he called some time later.

“What” muttered Jess.

“Sometimes” Slim said. “You know when Andy asks about the war I tell him about some of the wild times but there are things.... I ain’t sure I ever want to tell him.... Things I maybe only think about before I sleep.”

Jess grunted.

“You got things you remember before you sleep?” Slim asked.

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After a small silence Jess said “Yeah”. He hesitated then said gruffly. “Figure only way you don’t have to think about...things before you sleep was to have run. Then you think of other things.”

Slim was silent.

“But you wouldn’t have thought of runnin’ would you?” Jess asked nastily.

Slim could hear Jess breathing deeply in the silence of the Colorado night. “I thought about it” Slim admitted finally. “Guess there ain’t one of us who was there who didn’t think about it...some time.”

Jess grunted.

“Hey Jess” Slim said after a while.

“What” muttered Jess.

“You figure when we’re old, long past we’ll still remember them things....before goin’ to sleep.”

“yeah” said Jess. “Figurin’ if you get old.”

Slim grunted.

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Sometime later just as Slim was falling asleep Jess called "Hey Slim."

"What" said Slim.

"Guess it was more they deserted me." Jess said.

"What" said Slim

"Dispatch ridin'." Jess said. "Guess it was more they deserted me."

Slim took a deep breath "How?" he asked quietly.

"None of us ridin' were supposed to make it." Jess explained "Offered it to us because didn't want to lose fellas from their side. Only Prescott he wasn't so much like the others. Guess that's why I kinda admired him. Thought of all folks under his command. Like he did at Cold Creek." Maybe some of them others even figured it was a way of dispatchin' a few extra Texas boys.

Slim could just about see Jess's grim smile in the firelight.

"Way some of them fellas felt end of the war. Worked." Jess said. "At the end after Cold Creek. They had that court martial for Major Prescott. Only me and ol' Tom Springer left and he got killed ridin' just after. I took the last ride, got shot like the others. Luck I guess, crawled in a hole. Too cold to bleed to death. Didn't send any one out lookin'. Had to walk back to the camp...crawl

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back an' they was all gone. They wasn't worrin' about no Texas boy, not to go lookin' for 'im." he said. "Stole an Indian pony, made my way back to Texas" he said. "Told you what it was like down there."

"Maybe the officer thought it was the odds. One man against all those under him" Slim suggested grimly.

Jess snorted. "Some others wearin' blue suits were still shootin" at Texas boys further east." Jess said. "Guess you still were" he added.

"Guess" Slim agreed.

"Sure Lootenant," Jess said nastily which Slim recognised as covering a bitter memory. "Never sent no-one after the others, didn't expect it for me. Those fellas wearin' stripes and blue suits weren't interested in savin' no Texas boys." He hesitated. Waiting for Slim's reaction.

"Figures some would have thought that" Slim said carefully. "Feelin's was rough then."

"Would you?" Jess asked. "Thought no need to go lookin' for some Texas boy?"

"Nope" said Slim without hesitation. "I figure if I was in charge, responsible I'd of gone lookin'."

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“Figured” said Jess before turning his back.

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They rode all the next day, getting well into Colorado, where to Slim's satisfaction the wall of mountains on the west side was towering higher and higher, like an impenetrable wall blocking all trail west.

Slim smiled to himself as Jess rode on, sometimes talking but certainly seeming more at ease than he had been. Slim mentally listed off to himself all the places he thought he would have to watch for danger signals but it did not seem there was anything closer than a good day's ride so he could relax for a little while.

Even the fact that they failed to see any more signs that they were in danger of accidentally meeting wandering Arapahos, did not dually alarm him. The further they rode into Colorado the happier Slim got.

He looked up at the towering mountains and smiled.

"Sure is some country" Slim said to Jess.

Jess glanced to the high mountain range.

"Rough country to cross" he said.

"Sure is" said Slim making sure Jess could not see how happy that made him.

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God and nature was on his side.

Jess seemed to be riding easily, certainly he was over the temper and anger of the last few days. Slim hoped that maybe he had just decided to come home but he doubted it. He reminded himself to be careful.

Jess was a little quiet when they camped but nothing that was of too much concern.

They camped near a small stream that trickled down from the mountains. "You know where we are?" Slim asked as he unsaddled.

"Twenty miles or so north o' Cordossa I reckon" Jess said. "Quite aways."

They picketed the horses then Jess picked up his rifle and walked off. A few minutes and a shot later, he appeared with a rabbit which he sat down and gutted and skinned.

While Slim cooked over the fire, they both drank coffee. Jess was reasonably attentive as Slim talked about the time they were making and plans for catching up with chores when they got home. The only sign of restlessness he showed was as Slim banked the fire he wandered over to the horses and checked them then stood for a while staring at the moving stream.

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So Slim was not prepared when Jess finally turned around grim faced as Slim stood up.

“There is somethin’ I been tryin’ to tell you since we left Mexico, before” Jess said slowly.

Slim froze, then deliberately turned his back.

“Slim you’re gonna have to listen to me” Jess said quietly.

Slim frantically searched his brain for anything he could think of to stop this conversation and came up short.

Slim watched Jess for a second “Just supposin’ I don’t want to?” he asked as casually as he could.

“You’re gonna have to” Jess told him grimly.

Slim shrugged turned away and made a point of going to the horses.

Jess called “Slim just whoa back” Slim ignored him and Jess strode after him catching his arm to spin him around” I said whoa back” he ordered.

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Slim looked down at Jess, glaring at the hand still holding him. "What" he snarled.

Jess took a deep hard breath "I gotta tell you I ain't goin' back" he said and his voice caught slightly.

Which Slim noted.

"I ain't goin' back to Wyomin' Jess said in a rush "to the ranch. Decided back in Mexico. Figured, you're right. Figured Ella's right. Figured trouble comes after me. Figured it's safer for you, for Andy if it goes lookin' somewhere else for me. Than the ranch."

Jess watched Slim warily judging his reaction.

Slim said nothing. He just looked at Jess who finally was pushed into asking "Well?"

Slim shrugged. "Figured as much" he said eventually.

"I see" said Jess and Slim noticed his eyes narrow and his hand tighten a sure sign that Jess was not far off an explosion. "So when was you gonna tell me you'd figured I wasn't going back?" Jess asked quietly.

Slim decided there was no help but the truth. "Didn't figure that." Slim said "No way" he added determined.

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“What do you mean?” Jess demanded clearly uncertain where this was going. “You just said....”

Slim eyed him watching ruefully “Said I figured you was goin’ to tell me you wasn’t goin’ back. Haven’t figured you ain’t goin’ back yet” he added. “Wasn’t figurin’ on that happenin’ at all.”

Jess opened his mouth to say something, clearly unable to find the words. He turned around with his back to Slim, stood thinking for some time, and then spun back as he realised what was behind Slim’s moods and actions for the last few days. He lifted his hands in the air in disgust.

Slim watched Jess carefully looking for any signs that Jess was going to react badly. He backed off a few strides as Jess stepped toward him, trying to work out a safe distance from Jess. Too far to hit, to close to shoot.

Jess took another step toward him and Slim backed off another two “Hardcase why you son of a.....” he exploded

“Watch it” interrupted Slim.

“Yeah I know” muttered Jess “Ya ma was a right lady, but she raised a ...” Jess hit his hands to his side in frustrated anger.

Slim watched carefully for any hard signs that Jess was thinking of hitting or shooting.

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"I oughta..." Jess roared. " I oughta..." He sighed and to Slim's relief a smile twitched. "The lame horse?" He asked "The English fella in Las Vegas? Worryin' about them Indians? Gettin' bit by my horse?"

Slim reluctantly nodded.

"Hardcase you son of a...." Jess bit out

"Watch it" said Slim.

"If you ain't the mother and father of all two faced, double crossin'....." Jess bit out.

"I ain't the double crossin'... Seems to me, I'm just makin' sure you ain't" Slim interrupted. "You promised Andy you would come home. I promised him you would keep your promise."

"That's not what I promised him" Jess said tersely.

"It's what he thinks you promised him" Slim snapped.

"Maybe more important I keep what I promised him" Jess said making it clear he had thought it out. "You really figured you could keep it goin', to Laramie?" Jess asked more amused than anything as he thought over all the games of the last few days.

“Figured close enough” Slim admitted. “Figured when you got close enough to home you’d maybe start thinkin’ a bit straighter or maybe figure stayin’ ain’t so bad, that walkin’ out, runnin’ away from home ‘cause you made a fool over yourself over a woman, who ain’t worth it, is plain adding foolishness to foolishness.”

Slim took a relieved breath as he realised far from being mad, Jess was actually fighting not to smile.

“Hard case you’re a pistol” Jess told him. “You ever figured you maybe ain’t right about everythin’. That just sometimes you don’t know a horse from a goat.”

“Nope” Slim said smiling “want to explain it to me on the way home.”

Jess shook his head regret all over his face. “I ain’t goin’ back....home. To your home.” He said slowly.

The smile fell from Slim's face “Jess it's your home too” he said. “Just figured you needed to do some thinkin’, to work it out.”

“Nope” Jess answered in a sharp hard voice. He smiled just a flicker on the side of the mouth and Slim noticed his hand moving tensely again. “Yep. I did some thinkin’. I worked it out. I worked it out its better for everyone I don’t go back.”

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“You want to walk out because you made a fool of yourself over a woman. Not the first time, from what you told me about that woman in Laredo” Slim snapped. Jess’s mouth flickered half a smile again, “Won’t be the last. Don’t be a cursed fool over somethin’ that just don’t matter.” He added.

“Nope” said Jess. “Well mostly not that anyway” he said. “You know I told Laurel about settlin’ down” he said. “And I told her what it meant and she said..... well she was right about me.” Jess explained “What you been offerin’ me Slim means... I’m beholden to you. So beholden to you I ain’t sure that I could ever repay you but she was right.”

“I knew I should have shot that woman..... while I had the chance” Slim said angrily.

“Would have saved a whole lotta fellas a heap a pain” Jess agreed. “I’m trouble and when I asked you said you aren’t you tired of pulling me out of scrapes but the truth is the time will come when maybe you can’t pull me out” Jess said. “Slim I am what I am” he looked at Slim “I told you what I am the other day.”

“I know” said Slim “You ever figure bein’ who you are is why Andy wants you to stay around” Slim demanded “why Jonsey does, why I do.”

“Maybe that’s the best case you make for me goin’.” Jess said. “I’m beholden Slim I truly am and if I could repay you I would, and maybe the best way of repayin’ you is to keep you from the trouble I cause from walkin’ out after me. Or getting’ killed or

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getting Andy killed by someone like them bounty hunters, or worse.”

“Maybe I like the idea that just sometimes I got a reason to walk out for a while” Slim said.

Jess smiled reluctantly. “You got a heap of responsibility Slim” Jess said “But I ain’t asked any-one t’be responsible for me since my old man got drunk and tried shootin’ it out with old man Tyler an’ I had to carry him home when I was ten year old. Figured’ I out grew any one bein’ responsible for me that day.”

“You’re a fool” said Slim. He turned away then turned back “So” he said.

“So” said Jess taking a deep breath “So” he said working up to it. “I’d have gone earlier but I wanted t’say, what you done for me....”

“You say thank you so help me I’ll hit you so hard you won’t know what side of next month you’re on.” Slim yelled at him.

“Reckon you could?” Jess asked stopped in his tracks.

“Reckon I could. Right now I’m so mad at you I don’t care if I knock your head off” Slim said “and I’m figurin’ you do, care if you knock mine off.”

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“You sure don't take it good when things go agin you” Jess said wryly “Never knew that” he started to say, then ducked hard as Slim's fist came past his head. “Cut it out” he yelled moving backward as Slim took another swing. “Get it through your head” he yelled at Slim backing away as Slim came at him. “Since I come, there ain't been nothin' but trouble. Those bounty hunters coulda killed Andy 'cause of me.”

“Sure could, 'cause you weren't there” Slim spat out taking another swing, as Jess backed away further. “Wouldn't have even threatened him if you'd been there.”

Jess had finally backed off, until he was almost at the water's edge. “Would you cut it out” he yelled at Slim.

“You goin' to come home?” Slim demanded swinging again as Jess stepped back into the water and was stopped from moving further away by a log.

As Jess could no longer back off, Slim swung at Jess as hard as he could. Jess with not many choices ducked under the punch and hit him in the belly so hard Slim went down with a very loud oooof, lying back on the cold wet grass of the stream bank, gasping for breath.

“You dirty, double fisted....” Slim finally breathed out.

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“You’re lucky I didn’t bend a pistol over your head” Jess told him standing over him. “Iffen it wasn’t that no-one ever made such a show for keepin’ me around afore I woulda.”

Slim started to snarl again and struggle to his feet, fists still ready. Jess put a spurred boot near his face forcing him back down. “You stay there until I’m sure you’re comin’ up with your fists beside you” Jess growled.

“You’re a fool” Slim yelled at him from the ground.

“Ain’t arguin’.” said Jess “But I ain’t gonna hang around to kill you and Andy over trouble that comes after me. I been with ya maybe a few months, he said “and since then Roney you remember, and Gill Brady and Hatch. It ain’t gonna end and Laurel made me know that.”

“Should have shot her while I had the chance” Slim hissed still on the ground.

Jess half smiled “Woulda saved some fellas a heap of trouble” he agreed.

“The trouble ain’t all yours” Slim snarled Jess’s boot almost at his throat “You kill Yellow Knife’s’s kid, Ed Caulder come after you.” He demanded. “You hadn’t been around maybe would have gone different. You figure that” Slim yelled. “You know what I figure “Slim yelled trying to push Jess’s boot away and not

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succeeding. "I figure that blond was the first person who ever came after you, and it went wrong so you're blamin' me."

"Nope" said Jess " I'm figurin' she showed comin' after me can get someone killed."

"Should a killed that blond when I had the chance" Slim growled.

"Woulda saved a few fellas a heap of trouble if you had" Jess agreed.

"Let me up" Slim ordered.

Jess frowned at him. "You gonna show some sense?" he asked suspiciously.

"Sure" said Slim glaring up at him from the ground.

Jess pulled his foot away and Slim put up his hand so Jess could help him to his feet. Jess went to take it but must have caught something in the way Slim moved that made him realise Slim had every intention of swinging him straight into the water.

Jess pulled his hand back and stepped out of hitting distance. "You're a pistol" he said as Slim pulled himself to his feet, without help. Then Jess had to move further back as Slim stepped toward him.

“Don’t you never give up?” Jess demanded.

“Not when I’m right “Slim yelled.

“Get it through your thick head Slim” Jess roared “You ain’t right this time.”

Slim started to lift his fists.

“And cut it out.” Jess snarled. “I can take ya. Don’t make me prove it. ” Jess half lifted his fists and Slim decided Jess winning a fight of words or fists wasn’t going to help his cause, so with a wry grin, he lowered his fists.

“You’re a pistol” Jess said exasperated. “Bout time you listen to sense. Slim there ain’t nothin’ you can say that is gonna take away from me bein’ trouble and any-one near me is gonna carry that trouble.”

“You don’t recognise sense when it hits you in the head” Slim said nastily. “So how about sayin’ I don’t care” Slim said “Andy wants you to come home. Jonsey wants you to come home. I want you to come home.”

“I’m headin’ west “ in the mornin’.” said Jess “You got enough to get ... home.”

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“You’re a fool Jess” Slim told him “You’re throwin’ away maybe the only chance you got. You want to end like them Ed Caulder, like Carlin or maybe Sam Prado.”

“Maybe better than the other” Jess said, turning his back on Slim and walking away. For a second Slim thought he was leaving then and there, and wondered if he could spook the horses before Jess saddled. Except Jess’s horse was easy to catch and wouldn’t spook that far.

Jess turned around, read what Slim was thinking. “Don’t think about nothin’.” he ordered more amused than angry. “I’m leavin’ in the morning. An’ I’m beholden a fella would try so hard to keep me and trouble around” he added.

“I ain’t finished tryin’.” Slim muttered.

Jess smiled then turned to gather wood for the fire while Slim glowered at him. “You know you could a saved yourself all the worryin’ about Indians and such” Jess told Slim.

“Why?” Slim demanded belligerently.

“Because after we left Las Vegas, kinda figured you’d pull somethin’, argue about me leavin’.” Jess said “Maybe even do what I tell you not to. Wasn’t gonna say farewell until after we passed Cordossa.” Jess told him.

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“You two timing, double crossing...” Slim exploded.

Jess just looked at him.

They barely talked for some time, all though neither man made an effort to go to sleep.

Slim sat staring at the fire while Jess restlessly fidgeted, stood up, wandered to check one of the horses, checked his supplies and came back and sat by the fire. He poured himself a cup of coffee and one for Slim who took it without looking up.

“Up around the ranch” Slim said finally “it’s quiet.”

“Figure it is at this time of the year” Jess said

“You’re a fool” Slim snapped irritated.

“What” said Jess confused.

“When you’re not there its quiet” Slim said into his coffee.

Jess looked at him, in the firelight and frowned.

“You’ll figure I’m right soon enough” he said.

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“Soon as we see the first wanted poster” Slim sneered. He looked up “Folks notice” Slim explained “First thing Mose said after you left. ‘Looks kinda quiet around here. Where’s Jess?’. Aunt Ella noticed. First thing she said was the place was all quiet again now that no-account drifter has gone.”

“Glad to keep Ella happy. Should make it kinda peaceful when I ain’t there” Jess answered trying hard “You always complainin’ I make too much noise, especially in the mornin’.”

“You grunt around like a bear with a sore head in the morning” Slim said brutally.

Jess frowned.

“Ain’t complainin’.” Slim said.

Jess looked at him.

“Commentin’.” Slim said. “Not complainin’.” He looked up “The peace was drivin’ me to feelin’ I could maybe not stick it before you came. That it was all responsibility and nothin’ else.”

Jess shrugged “Stayin’ around to make some noise is a fool reason to stay” he said.

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“Best one I know” Slim muttered angrily refusing to look at Jess who shrugged again.

Slim did not sleep. He was so mad at Jess that it was all he could not to get up and kick him. He was made even madder by the fact that Jess having got it out that he was leaving and let Slim get his arguments out seemed to be sleeping for the first time on the whole long ride. And Slim was mad at himself because he had done everything from every trick he knew to outright honesty and he still could not get Jess home.

But then apparently Jess was not quite at ease about the thing as he said because as Slim finally did fall into a sort of sleep he heard Jess moving round making coffee. He turned over grunting.

Jess seeing him move asked “You awake?”

“No” Slim muttered.

“Okay” Jess said. He made coffee and then took a cup to Slim, who accepted it ungraciously.

Jess was more or less quiet for a while until he finally said “Slim there’s somethin’. I always been meanin’ to ask you.”

Slim made an angry noise.

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“Now that answer don’t matter so much” Jess said “so I figure I can ask.”

“What” said Slim.

“When I come” Jess said “that first night, how come you and Jonsey asked me to stay in the house not the bunk house?”

“Easier than fixin’ the bunkhouse” Slim said a little too quickly.

“Fella before me stayed in the bunkhouse” Jess answered. “You started to tell Jonsey somethin’ about it and Jonsey pushed you outside. After supper. I remember clear.”

Slim was silent.

“I’m leavin’ Slim” Jess said “It cain’t get me that mad.”

“Would you have preferred to stay out in the bunkhouse?” Slim demanded.

Jess was silent for a while. “No” he said finally “Stayin’ in the house, meant didn’t have to knock on the door to come in, meant didn’t have to ask permission for a cup of coffee, or wait for an invitation to sit in front of the fire. Meant I belonged. And you could not have figured on that, not the first night. So why’d you ask?”

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Slim took a deep breath “Andy” he said.

“I” Jess asked

“Andy and I weren’t doing so well together” Slim said “Jonsey figured he was so excited havin’ you around, to be around with you, if you weren’t around where I was, Andy wouldn’t be either.”

“I wasn’t fixin’ to make trouble” Jess said.

“I know that” Slim snapped. He shrugged. “Jonsey figured. It wasn’t anythin’ to do with you. It was about me and Andy. About givin’ us a chance, to talk without makin’ a fight over you. So if you stayed in the house, in front of the fire at night, where I was” Slim hesitated “so did Andy. You talked to me, so did Andy.”

“Andy talks about you all the time” Jess told Slim “He don’t have no problem at all. Thinks real high of you. Exceptin’ he don’t figure you ease off enough. Worry too much about workin’. Reckons you’re easier than you was though.” he added “Figured you and Andy get on fine. Have since I been around” he finished.

“I know we do” Slim said so dry that even Jess got it. “You asked” he added.

When Jess said nothing. Slim said” You promised Andy you would come back.”

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"I will" he said " when it ain't so dangerous I do."

"When?" Slim said reflecting Andy's last question to Jess.

"Sometime" Jess mumbled.

"How?" Slim demanded.

"What do you mean?" Jess asked.

"In a box" Slim bit out "Is that how you come back? Want us to clear a spot beside Ma and Pa? At least Andy won't have to worry that way where you are."

"Slim" Jess started to say

"Just go to sleep" Slim told him angrily. He finished the coffee and threw the cup down. It rattled around in the quiet night. He was just drifting asleep when Jess called out.

"Hey Slim" Jess asked "Why didn't you lite out when I told you I was a deserter?"

"Because I want you to come home" Slim said through his teeth.

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The next morning things weren't much better between them. They ate without speaking with Slim all but refusing to look at Jess.

Jess threw his things into his saddle bag and tied up his bed roll, all the time Slim refusing to say anything.

He walked over to where Slim was sitting in a log and looked down at him.

"I'm goin'" he said awkwardly. "Don't get any smart ideas about followin' me or talkin' me out of it. You figurin' something" he said and it wasn't a question. "Whatever it is don't" Jess ordered "Because this time it's me whose right."

Slim reluctantly smiled "Was thinkin' about it" he agreed.

Jess half smiled. "You're a pistol" he said and turned toward his horse

Slim stood up frowning and started to put his gear together. "You got any money?" he asked Jess. "I didn't pay you." He started fishing for the \$20 dollar note he had, and held it out to Jess.

"I got some" Jess said "I'll come pick up them wages some time. Tell Andy."

Slim snorted.

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“Keep the money” Jess told Slim “We’re past Cordossa but don’t get smart. I ain’t comin’ back for you. I ain’t followin’ you in. Just head north. Home.”

“Okay I get it” Slim said nastily “Places you go ain’t okay for me.”

“Well I ain’t a concerned about threatenin’ to blow a fella’s head off if they crowd me” Jess answered with a shrug “ Right or wrong.”

“Or do it” said Slim bitterly.

“Maybe” said Jess “and I ain’t holdin’ anythin’ so dear that I cain’t lite out and leave it behind.”

“I noticed that” said Slim even more bitterly.

“Slim” Jess started to say but gave up as Slim snorted.

Jess was already saddling as Slim retrieved his picketed horse. As was his habit Slim ran his hand over the animal's back checking for any pressure or soreness from the long ride and then ran his hand down its legs to check for any bumps or sprains.

And moaned out loud as he checked the front leg.

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Just to be sure he picked the leg up but a shoe was clearly missing. He winced. He then began to carefully check the length of ground where the horse was tethered but hard as he searched he could not find the shoe. All he could think of was that it must have got sucked off in the stream when he watered the horse the night before because he was sure the shoe was there when they camped. He went down to the water but there was no sign of it. He waded in, searching everywhere the horse had stood. Then went back and searched the picketed area again.

Jess was standing by his horse watching Slim hunt around. Slim groaned. There was no way Jess was going to believe him the shoe was lost. Then he smiled to himself. He ought to be pleased. Maybe God was on his side.

Jess had mounted by the time Slim came back from the stream. He rode over and put his hand out. "Slim" he said awkwardly as Slim just as awkwardly took his hand.

Jess sighed. He put his hand up to pull his hat in hard and wheeled around. He stopped and turned "I'm beholden to you" he said his voice tight.

Slim stood there as Jess looked at him, awkward uncomfortable. Slim frowned and Jess with a pained shrug started to ride away.

Slim took a breath "Jess" he called.

Jess ignored the call. He just seemed to slump over in the saddle.

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“Jess” Slim roared.

Jess pulled up “What” he said not looking around.

Slim took a deep breath. No matter how mad Jess got he could still figure God was on his side.

“Horse has pulled a shoe” Slim said uncomfortable “I got nails, I ain’t got a shoe. And we’re what, I reckon twenty miles from Cordossa. Unless you got one.”

Jess’s whole body went rigid. He finally turned back with grin “Hardcase you’re a pistol” he said. “Don’t you never give up.”

“I’m not lying Jess” Slim insisted.

“So you figure you need help “Jess said. He lifted his hat up and started to move out as Slim called “Jess” and then stopped “More ‘an twenty miles to Cordossa I reckon.” He told Slim. “Nice walk if you want to get there that bad after all I told you.”

“How much more than twenty?” Slim asked apprehensively.

“Quite aways” said Jess totally angry. He frowned “Would you really walk that far?” he asked curiously “Just to prove a point.”

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Slim kicked at the stony ground “Rough goin’ on an unshod horse” he said. “ Wouldn’t last maybe a few miles.”

Slim glared at Jess who sat on his horse for a while before with an angry sigh turning back. He stepped off his horse as it stopped and threw the rein at Slim who shifted his weight uncomfortably as Jess glowered.

Jess walked around Slim’s horse finally picking up the leg without the shoe. “Its missin’.” he said dropping the leg and straightening up.

“I know” Slim said.

“When did you pull it?” Jess asked mean. “I watched you all night.”

“I-didn’t-pull-it. Nearest I can figure he lost it in the stream” Slim said through his teeth. “ I’m tellin’ the truth, Jess.” He frowned “What do you mean you watched?”

“Figured you hadn’t given up tryin’ tricks.” Jess asked even meaner. “When did you loosen that shoe.”

“I-didn’t-loosen- it” Slim bit out.

Jess laughed nastily “Sound like you mean it” Jess said in Slim’s face “You surely are a better liar than me.”

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Slim raised his hands and let them fall because he remembered that God was on his side.

“No shoe uh” said Jess. He walked over to Slim’s saddle and bags deliberately emptying both the food bag and Slim’s saddle bag in a mess on the ground. He held up a small bag of horse nails.” Throw the spare shoes away did you?” he asked. “You’re a pistol. Don’t you understand I’m goin’.”

“I didn’t throw anythin’ away. I didn’t bring any. Figured he had new shoes on, just brought nails.” Slim insisted “Go if you don’t believe me.” He offered.

“Since when did you start comin’ into the big open without spare shoe?” Jess asked. “Mr ready for anythin’ himself.”

“Since I was ridin’ light tryin’ to catch up with you” Slim said between his teeth “You got spare shoe?”

“No” said Jess “I only took food when I left, which you know it” he said angrily “I ought cursed well leave ya to walk to Cordossa” Jess growled.

“It’s twenty miles” said Slim.

“More like twenty-five” said Jess snarling. “You plannin’ to cause trouble in Cordossa just ‘cause I told you to keep away?” Jess demanded.

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"I need you to get me to a blacksmith" Slim insisted. "I ride him barefoot in this country, he's gone and so am I."

"I know" said Jess furious. "Real funny Slim" he yelled. "Just a barrel o' laughs."

"Jess I didn't do it on purpose" Slim said "It happens, accident."

"You gonna tell me you never thought about goin' into Cordossa after what I told you?" Jess demanded.

Slim swallowed hard.

Jess snorted.

"It was an accident" Slim insisted.

"I didn't hear nothing click loose yesterday" Jess said.

"You were to busy bein'" Slim hesitated.

"Bein' what?" Jess asked nasty.

"A fool" Slim said just as nasty.

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“So you wasn’t goin’ to try nothin’ when I left?” Jess asked.

Slim took a deep breath “I was but it wasn’t goin’ to be loosenin’ a shoe.”

“What were you goin’ to do?” Jess demanded.

Slim smiled and Jess threw his hands in the air.

“You’re a pistol, Hardcase” Jess snapped.

Slim waved toward the food bag and everything thrown saddle bags “You gonna pick those up?” he asked his temper going.

“No Mr Sherman” Jess hopped up and onto his horse. “I don’t work for you no more. Pick ‘em up yourself” Jess snorted.

“Jess” Slim pushed “I didn’t’...”

“One more word out o’ you Mr Sherman Suh” Jess hissed “and you can walk the whole thirty miles into Cordossa.”

“Twenty five” said Slim.

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Jess looked down at him and without a word saying anything rode off.

“Jess how far is it into Cordossa?” Slim yelled.

Jess pulled up a few yards. “Quite a ways” he yelled without turning around.

Slim just threw his hands up in the air, and slowly and methodically repacked his saddle bags and the food bag. He glanced back down the road where Jess waited with his horse feeling the tension sidling. Slim was almost certain he could hear teeth grinding.

Slim slowly put his gear together, then saddled his horse and took the time to check carefully once more for the lost shoe. The longer he took the madder Jess got. He finally led the horse toward Jess who restlessly moved around, looking down at Slim with eyes still narrow and expression sour before he pulled his foot out of the stirrup so Slim could mount up behind him.

Slim was barely up behind him when Jess hit the horse with his spurs so it bounded forward. The led horse was not ready for the bound, and sucked back and Slim holding its reins was all but pulled backward from Jess's horse. Slim had to put his arm around Jess to grab the horn, almost pulling Jess back with him.

“Wher'd you learn to ride?” Jess snarled.

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“Calm down” Slim roared at Jess.

“Shut up” said Jess.

Jess moved on fast. At least until Slim finally put his hand around caught the reins and eased the animal himself.

“What you doin’?” snarled Jess.

“Horse has to make it thirty miles with both of us” Slim hissed.

“More like twenty” said Jess angrily.

“Just how far is it?” Slim asked nastily shifting uncomfortably on the back of the horse.

“Quite a ways” Jess snarled back.

They rode on for some time, Jess calming down to a jog and grinding his teeth some more as Slim reminded him the other horse was barefoot and they needed to keep to the soft edges of the trail.

“I don’t work for you no more Mr Sherman” Jess muttered. “So don’t figure I got any responsibility to take you into Cordossa. You want to walk fine with me.”

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"Sure your responsible" Slim said. "I been thinkin' about just how much you owe me."

Jess pulled up hard and tried to turn around to face Slim, which as Slim was right behind him was impossible. He swung his leg over the horn and slide to the ground, turned look up seriously "Slim I said I was beholden to you. I know it and maybe you don't think I'm payin you what I owe you by goin' but you got to believe me. There are things I done since... I'm doin the best thing I can by goin'."

"Lite out then too did you?" Slim asked nastily "Well, if you're so cursed beholden to me, why don't you start payin' some of it back. Like maybe what its costin' me chasin' down here or maybe work it off."

"Good try" said Jess.

"You owe me Jess" Slim shrugged. "I was thinkin' in terms of cash money" he said quickly when Jess started to get the hurt puppy dog look on his face. "Figured the goin' rate for good hired gun for protection is about 10 dollars a day. Seein' it involves riskin' your life. Keepin' a fellow out of trouble, reasonable fee."

"You ain't that good a gun" Jess snapped.

"You're alive" Slim said. "Let's say. \$5 a day double when there's shootin; and doctorin'." he said looking down at Jess. "which I reckon is most days."

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“You’re a pistol” Jess said throwing his arms in the air. “Take it out of the money you owe me. Or I’ll send it to you next time I win anythin’ at cards.”

“What wages I owe won’t even cover getting’ down to Tumavaca” Slim said.

“You sure weren’t lyin’ when you told me the pay weren’t much when I first come?” Jess muttered.

“Not lyin’ about anythin’.” Slim said.

“How lame was your horse?” Jess demanded “And what did you do with the shoe?”

“It was an accident” Slim insisted. “Honest.”

“Shut up” Jess snarled.

Slim grinned as Jess went to pick up the horn of the saddle to mount. He slide forward into the saddle so that Jess half crashed into him as he tried to mount

“You need a hand to get up behind?” Slim asked offering his arm.

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Jess looked at him narrowed eyed and then smiled "Sure" he said reaching up to take Slim's hand and with a swift movement started to yank Slim from the saddle. Slim ready for it spurred the horse forward. It bounded away and Jess was left sitting on his behind in the middle of the road.

He sat on the road watching as Slim went a couple of hundred yards before pulling up and waiting.

"They hang horse thieves in this part of the country" Jess yelled at him but straightened his hat and started to walk to where Slim waited.

"Can I have my horse back?" he asked sarcastically but his eyes were laughing.

"Nope" said Slim "Figure it's about worth to me what you owe me. Offer you a ride into Cordossa." he said and started to laugh.

"Give me a hand up" Jess said also trying not to laugh.

"Nope" said Slim.

Jess vaulted up behind him. And Slim pushed the horse forward so Jess had to grab the horn to stay on.

"Where'd you learn to ride?" Slim said slowing down.

Long Ride Home from Tumavaca

Jess was silent for some time into the ride. Finally he said “You could hurt that horse pulling the shoe off.”

“I didn’t pull it off on purpose” Slim insisted.

“You sure goin’ to a lotta trouble to keep me around so you can all get killed when some fella I once knew comes lookin’ for me shootin’.” Jess mused.

“No women come lookin’ for you shootin’?” Slim asked interested.

“Maybe” Jess said grinning.

“You sure goin’ to a lot a trouble to walk away from people who want you to stay” Slim told Jess.

“Want me to stay for the wrong reasons” Jess said,

“Andy loves you” Slim insisted. “That’s a good reason.” He half turned around.

“You want to get off and talk about it?” Jess asked.

“Take a real fool to get off a horse just for a conversation” Slim murmured.

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Jess laughed.

“Jonsey likes havin” someone around who appreciates his cookin” Slim pushed.

“I don’t appreciate his cookin” Jess muttered “ Nothin else to eat.”

“Go back and tell him” Slim suggested.

“Not that big a fool “ said Jess

“Wanna bet” said Slim.

“And you want me to stay because good hands are hard to get.” Jess said.

Slim pulled the horse up hard “I want you to stay” he said “we want you... we care about you.”

Jess was silent.

“And” Slim pushed. “You care about us and it’s why you feel you gotta go and it’s a fool reason” he said.

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Jess drew a hard breath "Best reason to go" he said. "Sooner or later Andy will have to say good bye anyway. How many times can I look at him like when I left? Put him through it?"

"You figure havin" him worry sick about where you are is any better. He won't stop carin' just because you go" Slim pushed. "Just mean he won't know."

"Maybe that's better" said Jess.

"You're a fool" said Slim

Slim pulled the horse up and did manage to turn around almost in Jess's face which made Jess slide back. "Jess come home" he said.

"Wyomin's your home Slim" Jess said quietly.

"It's your home if you let it" Slim told him "Jess you're offered a home, all you got to do is come back" Slim said "Lettin' go what I know you want. Then that's as big a fool as man can be" Slim said.

Jess lapsed into a morose silence.

"Aunt Ella will be mad as hellfire if you came back" Slim said over his shoulder eventually.

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“That could almost be a good reason to go back” Jess said trying to be funny and Slim caught his breath wondering if it was the first crack in the wall. “Thank you Aunt Ella” he thought.

“How far is in to Cordossa?” Slim asked.

“Quite a way” Jess answered then lapsed into silence until sometime later he ordered Slim to stop and slide off the horse to look at Slim.

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“Cordossa's over the rise” he said “Slim quit the games” he said seriously “If you're figurin' on playin' somethin' to get me... get your own way, it won't work. I'm tellin' you this is not the place. Maybe you know for sure about home.”

And Slim swallowed wondering if Jess had finally been thinking hard

“But I know what's it's like driftin'.” Jess continued “Some of these towns out here make a real habit of takin' from any one they think is takin' or maybe could be takin'. Like a fella on the drift. Just get the horse shod and get goin' home. Don't say nothin'. Don't figure. I knowed a few fellas who got themselves into some trouble in these towns sayin' howdy. Slim I ain't jokin'.” He added as Slim watched him contemplating.

“I hear you, I heard you all the way from Tumavaca” Slim finally answered. Very certain if he knew Jess and he did, that Jess was not going to leave until he was sure Slim was safely out of Cordossa.

“Cut the games” Jess told Slim as he vaulted back to ride double on his own horse, when it became obvious Slim was not going to hand it over.

They rode into Cordossa a very small town that had about 30 buildings, lined up on a narrow twisting street, one of which was quite a substantial looking jail. The town had a desolate air of a place turning in on itself, something about the shabby pain signs on the stores, some bordered up houses and a couple of hitching

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posts that were fallen down. In fact the town had such a sinister feel to it that in any other circumstances, Slim would have been more than willing to listen to Jess's advice and keep his head down and get out as fast as possible.

There were a few people around, but Slim and Jess seemed to be the only ones moving. There were some women resting in a balcony above a general store, some men on a veranda in front of a feed store playing checkers, two men with badges sitting outside the jail whittling.

"Don't anybody work around here?" Slim asked Jess over his shoulder.

"Just getting' ready to start" Jess said "Seein' us comin' in, fleecin' folks is their-business" he said. "Slim you just remember you promised you wasn't gonna pull anything."

"I remember what I promised" Slim said calmly. "But ain't we partin' ways?"

Jess made a muffled growling noise behind him.

They arrived in front of the livery stable that had a sheltered blacksmith's shop beside it and a coral on the other side. The forge was going but a nuggetty little man wearing a leather apron seemed more interested in talking with a group of men lounging round than working.

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Jess slide off the horse in front of the forge. "Just don't do nothin' stupid" he told Slim in a whispered voice. "Get the horse done and get out o' here. No matter what."

Slim dismounted and shrugged innocently. "You got me here" he said. "Figure we're gone our separate ways from now."

"You figure nothin' like it" snorted Jess. "I'm warnin' you Slim. Sometimes you just don't get things your way. I swear you pull anythin'. I ain't stayin'."

The man in the blacksmithing apron came over. "Something I can do for you gents" he said eyeing the led horse.

"Missin' a shoe" Slim said "didn't have spare."

"Take a real fool to go wandering around this country without a spare" said the blacksmith. The blacksmith picked up Slim's horse's foot. "Walked him down just getting him here" he said examining the foot. "Good thing you bought him in for a hot shoe" he said "Reckon you'd have lamed him some just jammin' a cold one on." He examined the hoof again and made some tutting noises "Starting to crack. Heels are kinda contracted anyway. I can fix it though."

"There is nothin' wrong with his heels" Slim said. "Shoe 'im myself and I know what I'm doin'."

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“Shut up” said Jess digging him in the ribs.

“Awful wore down” said the blacksmith “See for yourself.”

“I told you to keep on the soft going” Slim snapped at Jess.

“You was the one ridin’ most of the way” Jess replied between his teeth.

“You did the damage” Slim said.

“Shut up” said Jess.

“Thought you had some place to go” said Slim nastily “Why you still hangin’ around?”

The group of onlookers around the forge, all sat up looking from Slim to Jess with interest.

“Don’t start up” Jess said through his teeth. He took his horse’s reins, and looked as if he was about to mount.

“That’ll be \$5 mista” the blacksmith said to Slim.

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Slim glanced at Jess who was giving every indication he was about to mount and ride away. He turned back to the blacksmith. "What" roared Slim. "\$5 to put a shoe on a horse. Ten minutes work."

The blacksmith looked at Slim, winking at the onlookers "Horse needs hot shoeing."

Slim was watching Jess who to his satisfaction stopped mid mount and came back to the ground leant slightly against his horse before slowly turning around.

"You gonna start" ain't ya" he said to Slim. "You listenin' to anything I said."

"Sure have, every word. So you know what I'm gonna do" Slim said smiling maliciously.

Jess snorted viciously to the amusement of the spectators, then with some deliberation went over to lean back against the corral fence his hat pulled low over the eyes, standing away from the assorted group of onlookers who were gathering closer about the forge ready to enjoy the show.

"Tell you what I ain't gonna do" said Slim watching Jess. "What I ain't gonna do is pay \$5 for maybe 15 minutes work."

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“You ever in your life figure you ain’t gonna get your own way” Jess said without looking up. “ You son of a”

“Watch it” said Slim.

“Pay the man \$5” Jess said “and get goin’.”

“You comin’?” Slim asked.

“No” said Jess digging his heels in.

“Then I ain’t goin’.” said Slim. “An’ I ain’t payin’ \$5.”

The blacksmith winked at his supporters. “What it’ll it be?” he asked.

“We all got problems Mista “ Slim said. “Goin’ rate for a workin’ cowhand is \$1 a day. You rob banks in your spare time?”

“I got costs” the blacksmith drawled. “Got to get them coals burnt down, and the tools and import that steel all the way from Denver. You know the cost of blacksmithin’ apron. And I gotta put something aside in case I get hurt. Why last year danged if I didn’t get kicked by some old mule and couldn’t work for near two weeks an...”

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“Just pay the man the \$5 Mr Sherman” Jess interrupted. “An’ get on the horse and go back to Wyomin’.”

“No” said Slim.” Slim said stubborn. “I’ll do it myself.”

“Sure” said the blacksmith “\$2 for usin’ the tools and \$2 for the shoe, \$3 for renting the forge.”

“What” roared Slim.

Jess ground his teeth. “Well Mista Sherman suh, why don’t you just go break somethin’ in that big bank roll you carryin’ and pay the man the \$5.” Jess pushed. “An’ go back to your nice big ranch in Wyomin’ and stop bein’ a fool. I know what you’re tryin’ to do and it won’t work.?”

“Workin’ pretty good so far” Slim said to Jess who responded by pulling his hat down harder. “Score for you Jess,” Slim thought “that takes the drifter name away.”

The group of spectators eyes lit up at the thought of the bank role.

“You think it’s so reasonable you pay him” Slim smirked. “Figurin’ what you owe me.”

Jess glowered.

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“Score for me” thought Slim.

“I’m goin’.” said Jess gathering reins over his horse’s neck

“I’m stayin’.” said Slim.

They stared each other down.

“You want me to call the sheriff” said the blacksmith.

“What for, you haven’t done anything yet.” Slim snarled.

“Questionin’ a man’s good name, don’t go well in this down mista” said the blacksmith winking at the onlookers.

“Go get him” said Slim watching Jess.

Jess took a deep breath then looking away clearly recognising his best option was to get Slim out of the town. He dug deep into his pants pocket eventually pulling out an assortment of coins and counted out the five dollars, before shoving the rest back in the pocket.

“Score for me” thought Slim. He watched Jess pay “I’m goin’ to get a drink.” he said.

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Jess grabbed his shoulder. "You listen' to me Mr Sherman, maybe we jus' wait here and get the horse shod and be on our way" Jess said in a patient determined voice. "I told you about keepin' goin'." he said

"I listened" Slim said shaking Jess's hand off his shoulder. "and I'm gettin' a drink". He strode away toward where he could see a sign with saloon written on it, leaving an exasperated Jess behind him.

The blacksmith took the money "That's one mean tempered son of ... Wyomin' rancher you say?" he asked Jess

"Young fella like that and mean as ..." said one of the bystanders. "You wonder what makes a young fella that mean."

"Inherited the ranch" Jess said, loud enough for Slim to hear " makes a fella feel real entitled inheritin' a place."

"Score two for you Jess" thought Slim, not moving so far away that he could not hear what was happening. "Figure they won't be so quick on someone who is somebody do you?."

"Yeah" said another bystander. "Them inherited fellas sure think they is somebody. Work for him do you sonny?"

"I'm debatin'." said Jess and Slim still in hearing range stopped.

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“Dollar a day workin’ for someone mean as that” said another bystander “Couldn’t stomach a fella like that myself.”

“Takes some doin’.” Jess agreed “16 hours a day, nothing but warmed over mulligan stew for supper and preachin’ every Sunday. Goes off fishin’ after lambastin’ everyone else for maybe takin’ a minute to breath” said Jess enjoying himself.

“Them inherited fella sure are entitled” said bystander. “Once they want somethin’ their way cain’t convince them noway they won’t get it.”

“Yeah so I’m figurin’.” said Jess watching as Slim amused strode away. “Get the horse shod” he ordered. “I’ll go get him out of the bar and we’ll be on our way.”

Slim slowed down enough to make sure an increasingly angry and frustrated Jess was following. Slim was congratulating himself. Considering Jess had started riding away that morning and they had turned south, things were turning out pretty well.

Inside the saloon, which may have started out quite grand but was now a shabby place with peeling paint and splintered furniture, Slim ordered a drink, making a big fuss about what he wanted. The bar man, a table full of gamblers and a couple of girls, a buxom not very natural blond and a surly looking brunette already at work, watched the show. Slim fussed about the whisky, made some remarks about it looking watered and the cost.

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A couple of the onlookers from the blacksmith's forge came in.

"One of them rich ranchers from up north" an onlooker explained to the barman. "One of them inherited guys."

The two girls watching the poker game both looked up interested. The taller of the two, the buxom and decidedly not natural blond, who had quite an air about her, narrowed her eyes suggestively and smiled at Slim. "Hey handsome" she called across the room.

Slim raised his eyebrows and smiled at her, as Jess walked up beside him and slapped his hands on the bar hard "You havin' fun?" he asked Slim nastily.

"You gonna pay mista" demanded the bar man getting nasty.

"You know what they charge for a drink in this town?" Slim asked Jess.

"About 5 times what it's worth" Jess said. "Pay for the drink and lets go Mr Sherman" he ordered.

"Don't reckon I got that much change on me" Slim said feeling in his pockets.

Jess snarled "Slim I'm warnin' you" he said " It ain't gonna work."

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“Doin’ pretty good so far” Slim said happily.

“You gonna pay for that drink’?” the bar man demanded starting to reach below the bar.

“Ain’t got that much change on me” Slim said watching Jess.

Jess snarled furiously then dug in his pants pocket and slammed some of his rapidly diminishing coins on the bar.

He tried grabbing Slim’s shoulder to pull him away. But Slim resisted, picking up his drink and wandering across to the table where the gambling were leisurely playing. As he stood there the blond girl moved around the table to stand beside him, arching suggestively in his direction. Slim could hear Jess’s teeth grinding even though he was some distance from the bar. He smiled at the girl.

One of the bystanders from the blacksmith who had followed Jess over to keep watching the show was standing at the bar beside Jess. He called out to Slim. “A rich rancher ought buy the fellow who works for him a drink mista” he commented to the bar at large.

“Gets a fair wage and keep” Slim called back. “He can buy his own”

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“You don’t know nothin’ about lookin’ after a fella who works for you mista” the bystander said to Slim and there were various snorts of derision from interested parties in the saloon.

Jess looked at Slim and bit his lip.

“Here mista the drink’s on me” the onlooker said to Jess “Any fella working for a piece like that can do with a free drink. Them inherited guys deserve everythin’ comin’ to them” said the bystander nodding toward the blond woman, who by this time was holding on to Slim’s arm and draping herself against him.

Jess groaned. He accepted the drink and went over to Slim, who was watching the game. He grabbed hold of Slim’s jacket trying to pull him into moving.

“You know that game is crooked” Slim whispered.

“I know” said Jess pulling at his arm “Let’s go.”

One of the players stood up. “Want to play mista, fella who inherited a ranch sure can afford to play a little poker.”

“No he can’t” said Jess quickly “Drought and all.”

Slim smiled “Maybe” he drawled.

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“Shut up” said Jess.

“How big is that ranch?” asked the girl in a breathy voice.

“Miss it if ya took a short cut” said Jess nastily “Are you leavin’?” he demanded trying to prod Slim into moving.

“You comin’ home?” Slim asked.

“No” said Jess.

“I ain’t leavin’” said Slim.

Jess raised his eyes.

“Sure you don’t want to join in mista?” one of the gamblers asked very friendly.

“No he don’t” snapped Jess.

The blond girl leaned in on Slim “Hey handsome” she said to Slim who smirked. “Your ...partner surely wants to stop you having fun.”

“My...partner is a fool” Slim said. “Thinks havin’ a little fun could get me into trouble.”

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“Want to prove him wrong?” She asked slyly looking Slim up and down and licking her lips.

“Nothin’ would make me happier.” Slim smiled at her. “I thought you was riding off” he said to Jess who was hovering by his side glowering at him. Slim then put his arm round the girl and she moved in even closer.

Jess let out an exasperated breath then wandered back to the bar.

“That friend of yours is sure lookin’ for trouble” the bartender told Jess.

“Let me guess” said Jess kicking at the bar irritably. “She’s the sheriff’s girl.”

“Nope” said the bartender. He grinned smugly as Jess narrowed his eyes. “Deputy’s. But the sheriff’s his brother. You know your pal is really looking for trouble” he repeated. “You gonna let him?” the bartender asked.

“Fella goes lookin’ hard for something you ought let him find it. Might learn gettin’ what he wants ain’t worth it.” Jess said angrily thumping a fist on the bar. He deliberately turned his back on what Slim was doing and slowly sipped his beer.

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Jess finished his beer and slammed the glass on the bar. He looked over to where Slim and the girl were in close communication after moving over to a corner and settling down. Slim noticed Jess take a step to the door, stop, punch a fist into his hand and walk back.

He stalked over to the corner where Slim and the girl were sitting angry ready for action. "I'm goin'." he told Slim his voice rasping.

"Then I'm stayin'." said Slim smiling down at the girl, who licked her lips suggestively.

Jess glanced at the girl and then glowered at Slim "You ain't so stupid you don't know she's playin' ya. You tryin' to prove somethin' about getting' into trouble?" he demanded. "It's a game" he said rudely "She's only after that great big wad o' dollars you're carryin'."

"Somethin' I need to prove?" Slim asked innocently. "Lady says there ain't no trouble." He smiled down at the girl "You ain't figurin' on bein' nice just 'cause you think I got some money on me are you?" he asked her.

"Me, hey handsome, you know how long is it since I saw a man like you come in this place." She said archly reaching up to twist the front of his hair in her fingers and Slim sighed happily.

"Hey lady, how long?" Jess demanded ripping his gloves on harder as if he was aching to hit someone.

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“Hey Handsome you keep mighty impolite company” the girl said sniffing at Jess. “What’s a little trouble if you have some fun?”

“You’re one smart lady” Slim told her. “What I’ve been tellin’ you” he said to Jess “What’s a little trouble if you have some fun?”

“Are you leavin’?” Jess said through his teeth.

“Are you comin’ back to Wyomin?” Slim asked.

“No” said Jess.

“Then I ain’t leavin’.” Slim said

“I am” Jess said turning.

“Suit yourself” said Slim turning his attention back to the girl.

“Hey Handsome” said the girl working her hand on Slim’s shirt buttons. “You really inherited a ranch in Wyoming?”

“Yes” said Slim smiling smugly at Jess, who let out his breath in a frustrated sigh.

“Three mule place with the fences fallin’ down” said Jess.

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The girl narrowed her eyes.

“On the day you left, you were talkin’ about it bein’ one of the finest ranches in the territory.” Slim mused. “You goin’ to deny it.”

“You know cursed well I was talkin’ about maybe’s” Jess muttered pulling hard at his gloves again.

Slim smiled again knowing he had Jess in a spot and Jess knew it. The girl moved in closer to Slim if that was possible, both hands on his face. “Hey Handsome,” she sighed her voice all whispery “You know I’ve been waiting forever for someone just like you.”

“Forever” Slim said sighing. “You’ve been waitin’ for me forever.”

“She’s been waitin’ since the last fella she suckered got out of jail. Maybe yesterday” snapped Jess. “You think you’ll be spendin’ tonight anywhere but in jail, you’re a fool” he told Slim.

The girl pouted at Slim. “You gonna let him talk like that?” she asked petulantly.

“Thought you were leavin’,” Slim said to Jess.

Jess turned to walk away. Then he came back “If you ain’t the most stubborn, mule headed, ... fool I ever laid eyes on.”

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“Takes one to know one” said Slim enjoying himself.

“You always let the hired hands talk like that?” The girl asked breathily moving her hand down his shirt.

“I ain’t his hired hand” said Jess “You comin’?” he demanded again trying to pull Slim away by his jacket.

Slim shook himself free. “I ain’t leavin’.” he said. Slim, then he grinned. “Unless you’re figurin on comin’ home. Then I’m leavin’.”

“Aw Handsome you ain’t leavin’ me” whispered the girl.

Slim looked at Jess who punched his fist into his hand.

“Doesn’t look like I’m leavin’.” Slim told the girl as she draped herself closer.

“How long you gonna keep this up?” Jess demanded.

“How long is it goin’ to take before you give in?” asked Slim.

“You’re a fool” said Jess.

“Takes one to know one” said Slim still enjoying himself.

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Jess ground his teeth again and stalked away. Slim watched out the corner of his eye as Jess headed for the door. He took a relieved breath as Jess stopped then came back and leant angrily on the bar, digging in his pocket for what must have been getting close to his last coins and bought a beer.

“Hey Handsome” said the girl “He tellin’ the truth when he said you was carryin’ some of that nice cash.”

“Almost all I got” said Slim aware that Jess could hear him.

“Hey Handsome” said the girl, her voice sugary sweet “it sure ain’t often a man like you walks in a place like this. You pleased to meet me” she purred loud enough for the bar to hear.

“Couldn’t have worked out better if I planned it” Slim smiled back at her.

Jess leaning against the bar glowered in Slim’s direction.

“You look like a fella who knows his way around” the barman said “Can’t say the same for your pal.”

“Man’s a cursed fool” Jess said “Stubborn don’t know when to call it quits. Don’t know not everythin’ goes his way. ” He snorted “He knows what he’s doin’.”

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“Why would a man who has been warned and warned he’s courtin’ trouble try and prove he’s a fool?” the bar tender asked shaking his head as he watched Slim and the girl in the corner.

“Reckon because he’s tried everythin’ else.” Jess said exasperated.

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Jess stayed at the bar, mostly with his back to Slim, but he seemed to accept the inevitable. He did not even complain too loudly when Slim forced the last of his coins off him to pay for a drink for the girl. When the deputy and sheriff appeared at the saloon door and stalked toward the end of the bar to watch what the girl was doing, Jess glanced at them unconcerned. He merely looked toward where Slim and the girl seemed in close communication, raised his eyes and shook his head at Slim.

Slim mouthed the words "You comin' home?"

Jess shook his head and Slim shrugged and turned back to the girl.

So when the inevitable happened some minutes later, Jess turned around, rested his elbows on the bar and leant back and like most of the other people in the saloon got ready to watch the show.

The deputy strode over to the corner where Slim and the girl were. He was a big beefy broad shouldered man, with a permanent frown and a mean disposition. He stood in front of them hands on hips and in a mock polite voice asked "This here inherited fella givin' you trouble m'am?"

The girl immediately wrenched herself free from Slim's not very resisting arms and started loudly complaining about this rich fella thinking he could take advantage of every working girl who happened to say a polite hello.

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Slim stood up to argue the point, and the truth was it did not take much to get Slim going, even if he had not been looking for trouble. The girl, in a not to polished performance, began whining about strangers taking advantage of a friendly disposition. She demanded that the card players support her view that this here rich fella just pulled her away like he was entitled to handle anything around. The card players all carefully stared at their cards but the other girl jumped in to embellish the story. The sheriff moved in to listen to her version and made noises about fellas who figured themselves to be entitled. He frowned, he shook his head. Slim scowled. The deputy added his point of view about decent women not being manhandled by entitled outsiders while the girl whined that she was only interested in one man and arched herself against the deputy and she would never encourage a stranger.

As Jess was fairly certain would happen, Slim lost his temper, mostly for real. The girl was lying, the deputy was a smart ass who knew how to needle, and the sheriff was arrogant.

When Slim started to argue the deputy took a calculated swing, which Slim easily ducked. The deputy tried another swing and Slim hit him so hard he went flying backwards ending up tangled between an empty table and the piano in the corner. The deputy let his breath go in a surprised ooooooooooof but somehow staggered to his feet to go charging in at Slim like a lumbering wounded bull.

“Puts on a good fight for an entitled fella” the barman said to Jess as they watched Slim pushing the damage bill high as he took the deputy apart and a fair part of the saloon as well, while the girl screamed about evil men taking advantage of her .

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“She’s had some practice playin’ the role has she?” Jess asked the barman.

“Quite some” agreed the barman. “You gonna to help your friend?” he asked.

“Cain’t afford to” Jess said as he finished his beer “What’s the goin’ rate around here?” he asked the barman.

“Around 400 I reckon” replied the barman “with damages, probably be a bit higher than usual ‘cause deputy there won’t take kindly to gettin’ bested.” He nodded his approval as Slim slammed the deputy into three townsman enjoying a beer and the fight and they pushed him back toward Slim “Double it if you go to court.”

“Figures” said Jess moving to one side so Slim could get in a really hard punch.

“Entitled inherited fella like that should be able to get that kinda money easy” said the barman.

“You reckon he’d put that kinda money up for me” said Jess sidestepping the flying deputy who crumbled to his knees. “Doin’ okay without help” Jess added.

“Best stay out of it” said the barman.

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Jess sighed then winced when the sheriff apparently thought the damage rate was high enough and ended the fight with a pistol over the back of Slim's neck and he went down to his knees. With Slim on his knees the sheriff helped a battered and bruised deputy to his feet and then the two of them dragged Slim through the door. The people in the saloon watched with interest then realising the show was over for the day went back to their poker game and drinks.

The sheriff and deputy dragged Slim across the street to the jail and through a bolted door which lead to two cells. They threw him with no great care on the floor of the further cell, and slammed the door hard. The sheriff left but the deputy, with a nasty laugh, picked up a bucket of water and threw it over Slim and the narrow hard looking bunk in the cell. Slim yelled at the battered and bruised deputy who threw the water and got some very short shift for his trouble. Then the deputy laughed nastily and left Slim alone.

Slim tossed himself on the wet bunk. It smelled of something he didn't want to think about. He felt around the back of neck gingerly and nothing seemed to be broken. He guessed the sheriff had had plenty of practice in knowing just how hard to hit. Slim felt for any other bruising. Fortunately the deputy was so bull headed and slow he had barely landed a bunch. Any bangs and bruises Slim acquired seemed to be the result of being slammed into furniture.

Still as fights went that one had been pretty successful. He had survived it more or less in one piece and despite the start to the morning, Jess was nowhere near turning west.

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In fact Jess was getting so mad and frustrated that it might finally be occurring to him that if he wanted to get Slim home without any further trouble, the only way it was going to happen was if he went back too. Slim hoped right at this point that Jess was bitterly regretting that he had persisted in trying to out stubborn Slim by refusing to go back, given the trouble it was now going to cause him.

Slim put his hand to his head again. It was aching badly. Feeling to make sure the lump wasn't getting bigger he ruefully admitted to himself that the trip to Tumavaca had been cursed hard work, between the hard riding, getting shot at by strangers, worrying about Jess and knowing he was going to be haunted for a very long time by a vision of beautiful soulless carnal eyes.

Slim hastily pushed the vision away, reminding himself the job was to get Jess home. Lying in the wet cell bunk with an aching head Slim promised himself when he, when they, finally got back to Wyoming, this time he really was going to take that fishing break, and Jess could cursed well stay and do everything for the stage and ranch. He would even make sure that Andy came fishing too just so Jess had to look after all the cursed critters as well. Maybe take Jonsey as well so Jess had to eat his own cooking. Or invite Aunt Ella to stay for a week.

Slim lay on the wet bunk and when the smell got too bad, he stood up and paced the cell a little nervous. It did cross his mind that if he had miscalculated even a little on how Jess would react he was in big trouble. The place looked reasonably easy to bust out, and neither the sheriff nor the deputy seemed to have the guts to remotely protest but if he had to do it without help that compounded the problem.

Long Ride Home from Tumavaca

Slim continued pacing for quite some time until he finally yelled for the sheriff, and when he got no response, he yelled again. He had to keep it up for quite some time before the sheriff, a small prim little man with a nasty beady eye, appeared and threatened to throw another bucket of water. Slim ignored the threat and demanded to know why he was locked up.

The sheriff leaning back against the wall and crossed his arms told him with a smug expression “Let’s see young fella” he drawled “We got disturbing the peace, failin’ to follow lawful direction, assaultin’ a peace officer, damage to private property, assault with intent, assault causin’ bodily harm, insultin’ a lady, ...”

Slim snorted and the sheriff allowed himself a slight smile. “Course we ain’t unreasonable in Cordossa” he said. “We know a young fella out for a good time can get carried away” he smirked really hard. “Misunderstand a pretty girl’s intentions.”

Slim snorted even louder.

The sheriff unfolded his arms and stood up straight, his beady eyes even narrower “Young fella, you want out, just cut into that big bank roll of yours” he smirked.

“I don’t have a big bank roll” Slim said honestly.

“Tell it to the judge next week” said the sheriff.

Long Ride Home from Tumavaca

Slim pursed his lips and squashed down an impulse to reach through the bars and punch the smirk off the sheriff's face. He conceded that Jess was right about south Colorado towns making a living off graft and extortion. They were places where his sense of what was right would get him into some bad trouble.

The sheriff turned around to go and Slim thought he better check they had not found his "big" bank roll. He felt carefully into his pockets. His pen knife was gone so he assumed they had searched him for the roll. He felt frantically into the inside of his vest, fortunately the one and only twenty dollar note was still there.

Slim paced the cell, getting more and more worried about what Jess was doing. Jess had no money so it was not likely he was still drinking in the saloon. He rubbed his head again. He had taken quite a hiding to prove to Jess that he was needed and going back made some sense. If he did not know Jess as well as he thought he did....Slim swallowed hard. But then he did know Jess. Jess would be just mad enough to make him sweat it out for a while.

Slim paced some more. He heard muffled voices in the office on several occasions but it was quite some time later before the sheriff appeared with, to Slim's relief, Jess behind him.

Jess had left his gun outside and some of Slim's relief disappeared when he saw just how mad Jess was.

"Head hurtin' handsome?" Jess asked nastily and the sheriff laughed.

Long Ride Home from Tumavaca

“You come to get me out of here?” Slim asked.

“No” said Jess even more nastily.

“Get him out easy” said the sheriff “You got 400 bucks. You just explain to this here young fella the trouble he’s in” he told Jess “ if he don’t produce it.”

“Workin’ on it” said Jess.

“Got a workin’ telegraph office an’ all” said the sheriff “Telegraph his rich kin folk.”

“I ain’t payin’ 400 dollars” Slim snapped “and you ain’t telegraphin’ anyone” he ordered Jess.

“Shut up” said Jess.

To the sheriff’s amusement Jess stood there silently glowering at Slim and Slim wryly stared back. With a laugh that was almost a sneer the sheriff turned back to his office . “I’ll leave you two gentleman to discuss it” he said. “But Judge won’t be around until next week and I can tell you he takes a dim view of entitled fellas insultin’ our women folk. He feels more n’ twice as bad about such doin’s as I do.” And he laughed out loud at his own wit.

Long Ride Home from Tumavaca

Jess stood back leaning against the wall and his expression was like thunder.

The sheriff had barely shut the door before Jess roared “Ya had to do it didn’t ya. everythin’ I said about these towns, and what can happen and you didn’t listen’.

“Every thin’ you said I listened to you real good” Slim replied calmly. “And it was your idea to make out I was somebody. You really think that would keep me from causin’ trouble?” he asked sweetly.

“You tryin’ to prove that you can get into trouble as much as I can?” Jess demanded angrily.

“Tryin’ to prove trouble doesn’t matter” said Slim reasonably. “Can happen to anyone, so there’s no reason not to go back to Wyomin’.”

“ How’s it workin’ so far?” Jess snarled sarcastically.

“Workin’ pretty good” said Slim pleased with himself. “You ain’t ridin’ west.”

“I ain’t ridin’ north neither” Jess snapped. He slapped his hands on his side “You are the most stubborn mule brained cursed fool...”

Long Ride Home from Tumavaca

“You said that before” Slim interrupted. “You gonna bust me out here?”

“If I did you start fussin’ about goin’ back to Wyomin’?” Jess asked.

“Yes” said Slim easily. “That’s the idea. You want me to get home, only way its goin’ to happen is if you come.”

“Then I ain’t bustin’ you out” said Jess slapping his thigh in irritation.

“Fine” said Slim.

They stared each other down.

“Course you could just pay the \$400” Jess said even more sarcastically. “Then you’re outta here and goin’ back to Wyomin’ and I ain’t.”

“Wouldn’t pay it if I had it” Slim said “Nothin’ but extortion goin’ on here. So you’re gonna have to bust me out or leave me.”

Jess glowered at him “If you did it all figurin’ somehow I would bust you out and ride back to Wyomin’ you got it wrong, real wrong” Jess said. “You can rot as far as I’m concerned.”

Long Ride Home from Tumavaca

“Don’t figure that at all” said Slim. “Don’t figure I’m wrong” he said. “Don’t figure you got much choice” he told Jess very pleased with himself.

“Ever figure you ain’t always right about everythin’?” Jess demanded. “I could pay the \$400 and just let you ride home by yourself.”

“Nope” said Slim. “You don’t have \$400.”

“Well you’re wrong this time handsome” Jess sneered “This time you ain’t decidin’ how it goes.”

Slim shrugged. Jess glared. They stared each other down again.

Finally Jess looked away. “You still got that 20 dollars?” he asked punching his palm against the wall.

“Yeah” said Slim wondering if he ought to be grateful there were bars between him and Jess.

“Give it to me” Jess ordered.

Slim started to put his hand in his vest then he stopped suspiciously “You comin’ back to Wyomin’?” he asked .

Long Ride Home from Tumavaca

“No” said Jess.

“I’ll keep the twenty” said Slim calmly.

Jess threw his hand in the air “You stubborn mule headed...”

“You said that” Slim told him then went back to lie on the wet bunk in the cell.

Jess stalked toward the office door. Slim watched him go. Jess stopped, hit the door hard then turned around and stalked back.

“You gonna bust me out?” Slim asked not looking at Jess

“No” said Jess.

“You busted Pete Morgan it of one of these jails” Slim pointed out.

“He was a criminal not a fool” Jess snarled.

“You son of a...” Slim started to say getting annoyed.

“Watch it” Jess interrupted. “Give me the twenty” he ordered.

Long Ride Home from Tumavaca

“No” said Slim still lying on the bunk.

“You wiped me out o’ cash” Jess complained as Slim acknowledged it with a smile. “Don’t figure we’ll be movin’ for a while, unless you’re plannin’ on showin’ some sense. You want to starve them horses?”

Slim frowned then hesitated while Jess glared at him. “Not if you don’t bust me out” he agreed then he slowly put his hands into the inside of his shirt and pulled out the \$20. He stood up and handed the note to Jess, who took it, then smiled smugly for a second which instantly made Slim suspicious.

“Be seein’ you around Mr Sherman” Jess smirked and turned on his heel, slamming the corridor door hard.

“Hey” Slim yelled at him but the only response he got was the sheriff roaring at him to shut up.

Slim started to get worried. He had calculated that Jess’s options would be the same as those for Pete Morgan. Leave him there or an easy bust out. And knowing Jess the way he did he was sure it would be bust out and that meant he could get Jess just about home. Jess was not going to leave him stranded nor was he going to leave him with the possibility of a crooked lawman chasing him down. He was certain, fairly positive, if he knew Jess and he did, if he could talk Jess into busting him out he had Jess as good as home in Wyoming.

Long Ride Home from Tumavaca

Slim prowled the cell. He spent a long and restless night worrying where Jess was and what he was doing and half expected with every noise that it was Jess coming back to break him out.

But the only intrusion was the deputy, very late bringing him a plate of mush that made Slim think longingly of Jonsey's Mulligan stew.

Slim asked him where Jess was and the deputy took smiled maliciously "What did you do? Give him your bank roll?" he asked.

Slim sucked his lip and the deputy openly laughed. "Your pal is over in the saloon losing it all" he said. "Just saw him lose quite a pile out to a fella bluffin' over a pair of nines. That pal of yours better stick to cow punchin'. He ain't much of a poker player."

Slim groaned. Jess was right, he was trouble. And stubborn and never knowing when he was licked. Anyone else would have just given in and gone home when the girl first made her move. Not Jess, no taking the easy option, he had to stubborn it out. Slim worried all night hoping Jess was not doing what he thought he was doing. And if he was, he worried that Jess was doing it well enough to not get caught. Disturbing the peace may have been a game in Cordossa, cheating at cards would be a near lynching.

Slim barely slept, worrying. He prowled the cell and waited, listening for every noise, listening for gunshots, raised voices, but by late into the next morning no-one not even the lawman had appeared.

Long Ride Home from Tumavaca

Slim had just about worked himself up into deciding Jess had got himself killed and getting ready to bust out himself the first sign of a lawman when to his relief just before noon, Jess finally appeared. He was walking in front of the sheriff, scruffy unshaven and looking the worse for wear and Slim's heart went jump that this might have to be a double bust out. Until Jess stood aside as the sheriff opened his cell.

"You can go" the sheriff smirked his beady little eyes glowing. "Your pal here paid the fine."

"My pal don't have any money" Slim said.

"Get movin' unless you want to go before the judge.... Next week..... go for \$800" the sheriff snarled.

Jess far from happy, stood back as Slim far from happy went to pick up his hat. The sheriff shrugged and left the cell door open but went into the office.

"Where did you get the money?" Slim demanded furious with relief.

"How you reckon?" Jess said sweetly.

Slim glowered at him

Long Ride Home from Tumavaca

“Had a lucky night at poker” Jess said.

“You told me you never won over two hundred dollars in your life. Before.” Slim snapped.

“I haven’t” Jess answered slowly. “Not when I wasn’t cheatin’ anyways.” he drawled.

“You know how stupid that is” Slim yelled. “Didn’t you spend half the ride from Tumavaca warnin’ me about places like this one. What they do to cheats and fools. You get caught in a town like this, they shoot you soon as look at you.”

“This from a man bellyachin’ because he I didn’t bust him out of jail” Jess said to the wall. “And there was me thinkin’ you hadn’t listened to a word I said.”

“I listened” Slim snarled.

“Trick is not to win so big anyone figures you out for big money. Let ‘em take a few hands, play lucky and careful.” Jess explained.

“What if that sheriff figures it out” “Slim demanded “He wants \$400, you win it. It don’t take many brains to work out you was playin’ crooked.”

Long Ride Home from Tumavaca

“Probably has already” Jess conceded “But this way he gets the lot. If he makes a fuss he only gets a cut of the twenty. So shut up and get movin’.” Jess smiled with the satisfaction of someone who had just won the game. Not only poker but out stubborning Slim. “Sometimes Slim you gotta figure things don’t go the way you plan. You play a good hand and you still lose.”

Slim threw his hands in the air “In the name of heaven, of all the stupid, fool headed... you warn me about bein’ careful and then you...” Slim roared “You got trouble printed on your forehead. You’re cursed dangerous.”

“That’s what I been tellin’ you” Jess scowled “You comin’ or you want to go for a court appearance and go for 800 dollars?” he asked scathingly.

“You comin’ back to Wyomin’?” Slim asked.

“No” muttered Jess.

Slim took a deep hard breath. “Guess we wait for the judge and try for the eight hundred” he said going back to sit on the miserable cold bunk.

Long Ride Home from Tumavaca

For several seconds Jess was quiet with disbelief while Slim watched him. Finally he screamed “Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh” before slamming his hand hard against the wall three times. “You stupid, stubborn.....”

“You said all that before” said Slim smugly then instantly regretted it because the cell door was not locked this time and Jess stalked over and grabbed him by the vest hauling him to his feet. He tried shoving Slim to the door and Slim resisted, pulling backward and taking Jess with him.

They grabbled around the cell for a few minutes, Jess dragging Slim to the door, and Slim resisting. They were finally stopped by the sheriff appearing back at the cell.

“What in....” he demanded as the two of them struggled. He came forward and hauled Jess away from Slim, shoving him none too gently across the cell. “You want I shut the door” he yelled.

Jess on the other side of cell glared.

Slim smiled “Just discussing a day in court” he said sweetly.

“Your friend paid the fine” said the sheriff.

“Maybe I want to say my side of it” Slim said sitting down on the bunk.

Long Ride Home from Tumavaca

Jess slammed his fist against the wall again.

“Unless you’re in a hurry to get back to Wyomin’.” Slim said to Jess.

“Ain’t goin back to Wyomin’” Jess said his voice getting shakier to Slim’s satisfaction “I can always get the \$800” he said but it was bravado. The threat was gone from his voice.

Slim smiled with the satisfaction of a winner.

“Hey young fella” stuck in the sheriff. “You two maybe knowin’ your games but you got three minutes to get outta here or you both face the judge.”

The sheriff glowered at Jess, Jess glowered at Slim and Slim smiled then lay back on the bunk pulling his hat over his eyes. Jess finally hit the wall nearly as hard as he could three times. He pulled his hat off and nearly punched a hole through that.

“Okay young fella” said the sheriff grabbing Jess’s arm,

“You stubborn, mule headed...” Jess said.

“You said that already” Slim answered pulling his hat further over his eyes.

Long Ride Home from Tumavaca

“Young fella I just ran out of patience” snarled the sheriff

Jess made a grinding noise on his teeth. “All right” he screamed.

Slim sat up “Okay” he said.

“I’ll ride back to the border with you” Jess conceded.

“Not far enough” said Slim lying back down on the bunk.

“Give you a few more miles to work on me” Jess said furious with himself for having to offer.

“Listen young fella” snarled the sheriff “I had enough from you pair of jokers. You want to go for the judge, both of you or you’re outta here right now.”

Slim looked at Jess who was so angry a muscle near his mouth was spasming. “Okay” he said standing up.

“Hardcase you’re a pistol” Jess muttered “I only said the border” he added.

“Sure” Slim agreed smiling while Jess fumed.

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He picked up his hat and pushed past the sheriff and Jess and went through the door into the sheriff's office. The brawny deputy lounged back in a chair sneering at him and carefully counting the pile of notes that Slim assumed was the fine Jess had paid.

"You going to get the horses" he said to Jess "I'm..."

"They're out front" Jess snorted. "Just walk out, get on, and get goin'."

The sheriff handed Slim his gun belt. "Do as your pal says mista" he smirked.

Slim buckled his gun on "You got a nice little game..." he started to say to the sheriff.

"Shut up" said Jess.

Slim ignored him. "I was only sayin'," he said "I've been hearin' about this town for quite some time." He said. He glanced at Jess who positively fumed at him. Slim smiled "and I just want to say there was nothin' here that disappointed me. Nothin'. Couldn't have lived up to expectations better."

Jess ground his teeth.

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The sheriff looked Slim up and down “You inherited fellas” he snarled “Think bein’ born with somethin’ makes you better and the rest of us. Well sonny I can tell you take away what your old man left you and you got nothin’ more than anyone else. You gotta stand on your own hind legs like anyone else and make it and you know most of you can’t do that because it turns out without the land you’re nothin’. You got no one. You’re just another bum drifter.”

“I wouldn’t say that” Slim said pursing his lips at Jess who flushed. “Wouldn’t say that at all.”

The sheriff snorted. He turned to Jess “Listen to me young fella” he said “You just watch this here inherited fella. Or run. Either way because he’s trouble. Gonna get you in to it, gonna drag you along and there won’t be no turnin’ back.”

Jess went even redder. “Sure” he muttered.

Slim on the other hand openly grinned. He pulled his hat off and bowed low “Thank you sheriff” he started to say “You couldna done me a bigger favour if...”

Jess behind Slim put his hand on his shoulder and literally shoved him out of the door. The deputy snorted then stood up to follow them out, leaning against the door, hoping for another fight Slim suspected.

Long Ride Home from Tumavaca

As Slim stood on the boardwalk watched by a number of interested citizens, he stopped and Jess bowled into him. "You got my twenty?" he asked Jess

"Get on that horse" ordered Jess, livid.

"I'm not leavin' until you hand over" Slim said planting his feet.

Jess muttered under his breath at him, but to Slim's satisfaction accepted that he was not going to win. He dug in his pockets then handed Slim over a wade of money that was considerably more than twenty dollars.

"What's that?" Slim asked suspiciously noting how much was there.

"Figured on what I owe you for body guardin'." Jess told him "Told you the next poker game. Now we're square. You don't owe me and I don't owe you."

Slim took a deep breath "Jess that isn't why I came and you know it." Slim said.

"Get on that horse" Jess ordered.

"How about a drink before we go?" Slim asked innocently.

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“Shut up” said Jess shoving him toward his horse.

Slim smiled to himself taking his time before mounting and noting the more time he wasted the madder Jess became. As he swung onto his horse, before he had even put his foot in the right stirrup, Jess half shoved the animal toward the north facing road. Slim ignored Jess’s pushing and stopped to glance around the town. As he eyed off the townsfolk watching him leave, Slim noticed that the blond girl from the yesterday was standing on the boardwalk outside the saloon watching him.

He moved his horse around Jess’s shepherding and ignoring Jess’s roared “Slim” rode over toward where she watched.

The deputy beyond him started to move and the girl shrivelled a little as he approached, and for a fleeting second Slim had to push down a vision of Laurel at Tumavaca, facing the world defiant, unlike this cowered girl.

As Slim got to her he smiled, and tipped his hat. “Thank you m’am.” He said in his most gentlemanly voice “I’m in your debt” he said as Jess grabbed his rein and pulled his horse north.

After something of a tussle with Jess at the edge of the town to get back control of his horse, Slim pointed north “Wyomin’ is that way” he said.

“I know where Wyomin’ is” Jess snapped.

Long Ride Home from Tumavaca

Slim jogged along happily heading north. The same could not be said for Jess. He rode silently along, lost in thought and Slim let him, deciding that there was only so much to be gained from winning. Out stubborning Jess was only a proper victory if it got him home, knowing it was really home.

Finally some hours later Jess turned to Slim and said “You did it a purpose didn’t you After everythin’ I said about keepin’ your head down in these towns, After you promising you wouldn’t think about it.”

“I only promised I wouldn’t think about it in town” Slim said “I didn’t. I thought about it out of town.”

“That splittin’ the difference” Jess said angrily.

“So is tellin’ Andy you’ll come back and not meanin’ comin’ home” Slim pointed out.

Jess took a deep hard breath “So did you pull that shoe off on purpose?” Jess asked.

“No” said Slim.

“Sure about that” Jess said suspicious.

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"I didn't" said Slim "But if I'd known it was one thing that would make you turn back I would have."

Jess snorted.

"Soooooooooooooooooooo" Slim took a hard deep breath. "Seein' I didn't do it and seein' the way things worked out you could just figure it was a message from higher up sayin' things were meant to be" he told Jess.

"So that performance in Cordossa was inspired by higher up?" asked Jess mockingly.

"Lord helps those who help themselves" said Slim.

Jess snorted "Do I have to listen to you preach all the way to the border?"

"You said you would" Slim pointed out. "Unless you want to duck that promise too."

Jess ground his teeth. "So what are you gonna try at the border?" Jess asked " because you better know if anythin' happens to a horse there you're walkin' home."

"I'm bettin' the odds are against it." Slim said. "Me walkin' home"

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Jess threw his hands up in the air “You gonna keep tryin’ ain’t ya” he hissed. “You gonna keep pullin’ and figurin’ you gonna get your own way.”

Slim shrugged “Lot of Colorado towns between here and the border” he pulled the money out Jess had given him. “Got some dollars to spend” he said, “Figure the next one will take a promise to come home to get me out of jail.”

Jess took a massive deep breath. He sat on his horse watching Slim and slowly shook his head. “Slim I been tellin’ all the way from Tumavarca, an’ you say you been listenin’ but it ain’t goin’ through. There’s trouble follows me, follows night and day an’ sure as night and day those round me get dragged in. You might o’ thought that was a real fun joke back there in Cordossa but it coulda gone bad. An’ you wouldna done such a foolishness accept an’ you was chasin’ after me with some fool idea you was goin’ to rescue me from me.”

“I promised Andy I would bring you home” Slim insisted “And I ain’t breakin’ my word to him. And you promised him you would come home.”

“Did you listen to anythin’ I said comin’ up here” Jess demanded. “About what I’m really talkin’ about. Just what you can expect with me around.”

“Yeah” said Slim. He pulled his horse up and Jess had to stop riding to face him. “I heard you talk about things that would send Aunt Ella bustin’ her corsets she would be screamin’ murder so hard

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and maybe some stagecoach guys yellin' fit to bust too. You told me and I don't care. Andy don't care, Jonsey don't care. You want to know why?"

Jess swallowed hard.

"Because all that is against the fact" Slim said "that since you come Andy and I have been makin' a home. Cause the truth is Jess that some months ago I could not have said 'Come home Jess' because there wasn't one to come too. And Andy knows it and he's as scared of losin' it as I am, and if you don't believe me ask Jonsey how things were." Slim swallowed, "The truth is if they come after you, like those bounty hunters, they'll come lookin' even after you're gone, so what is done is done and if they do come I reckon I'm better off facin' it with you behind me."

Jess shrugged awkwardly. "Sooooooooo no matter what I say about trouble, no matter what I tell you I done and how its gonna come back, you gonna keep tryin' til I say I'll come home"

Slim suddenly felt a he weight leave his shoulders at the word.

Slim pulled up his horse and got off to look at the huge mountains west "Sure some country we rode through" he said.

Jess dismounted beside him and stood looking at the country around.

Long Ride Home from Tumavaca

“Yes” said Jess. “We rode through some open spaces.” Jess turned toward Slim. shook his head. “In all my days I ain’t never known anyone to go to such much effort to invite trouble into their home” he said “ or keep it there.”

Slim shrugged. “You know it ain’t much use arguin’ about trouble or not” Slim said “I know most of it and you know I know it. He hesitated “ If I say somethin’ you gonna get mad. About Laurel, about goin’ with her”

“Now he starts worryin’ about getting’ me mad.” said Jess to a rock.

Slim smiled.” I reckon” he said carefully “that not once before, what you told me, the war, your old man, no-one ever came after you until Laurel turned up. I can understand seemin’ like she came after you. It was maybe the first time you figured you might just be ...wanted, find a home.”

Jess winced. “Seems all kinda foolish comin’ down with Laurel” he admitted. “Knowin’ now. But when I knew her at the Diamond D. She was ... felt just that she could’ve made it okay. Knew she was married but she made a man want... found myself thinkin’ ...about DeWalt and maybe if he wasn’t there. Didn’t like that, didn’t like it at all. Broke away but ...she wasn’t easy to forget. When you try” Jess shrugged “ I told you what it was like... thinkin’. Guess I let her make me act like a cursed fool. Wantin’.”

Slim breathed in the crisp cold Colorado air. “Maybe not,” he said “At least you won’t die wondering.” then wiped his hand across

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his eyes as a vision of Laurel DeWalt's beautiful, soulless face as she defiantly watched her husband leave her, flashed in front of him.

Jess narrowed his eyes watching Slim. " Might die wishin' " he said slowly.

Slim swallowed hard, staring out at the mountains to the west. "Jess" he said carefully almost warily, not looking. "There is somethin' I need to say, been thinkin' I should since we left Tumavaca."

Jess looked at him, eyes narrow, jaw tight hands tight waitin' for the lecture he knew he had coming and he did not need to hear, was not even sure even now he could trust himself to listen to it.

Slim noticed the reaction and ignored it "First off, I know you're feelin' foolish about... her " he said taking a hard deep breath as if to have enough air to get it out " but she only makes you a fool if you let her take what you got now away. An' as for ...dreamin' maybe it's a fool thing but ... But..." he swallowed hard again "You remember when we were talkin' back on the trail... about thinkin' about a woman. "

Jess eyed him suspiciously.

"You talked about maybe remembering a woman, when you turned around, when you closed your eyes. When you smelled somethin'."

"I remember" Jess said tightly.

"Mrs DeWalt." Slim's voice caught "Just so we're square on this. She looked at me. Just after you left and I saw her. Just as she was sitting on that horse, lookin' like some sort of....."

"I know how she looked' Jess's eyes became even narrower and his expression dark.

Slim nodded "She looked at me" he said " and I know she was lookin' maybe for a bed that night and I know she was I know how she used ...anyone ... but she looked at me... and I can still see it. Think it will be a long time before I don't" Slim swallowed, "Didn't say anythin' but for a seconds maybe even more I thought real hard about just what it would be like, just havin' her look at me. I knew what she was and I... thought real serious about it. Maybe not so long but it could have been forever."

Jess did not say anything.

"If you hadn't been goin' so hard in the other direction" Slim admitted "I maybe would have gone." He looked at Jess watching for a reaction "Thought you ought know. So as things is square." He shrugged ruefully "An' I know what she was. So" said Slim. "Tell me whose the bigger fool?"

Jess turned back to looking at the view. He smiled the half crooked smile and shrugged, wryly. "Takes one to know one" he said eventually.

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Slim took a deep hard breath and risked it. “Jess” Slim said “I’m asking straight out. No games. Are you comin’ home?”

Jess looked at him “No games. How many time you gonna chase after me when I go?” Jess asked.

“Maybe as many as you planning on goin’.” Slim answered “You know if you come home, Aunt Ella will be mad as all get out. She was dancin’ a jig when she thought you’d gone.”

He looked at Slim “You know I’m right” Jess said. “About what trouble is going to follow.”

“I know a fella” Slim answered quietly “Good friend who never cares about goin’ in after me, no matter how fool he thinks I’m bein’ jus’ cause I think I’m right. I been lucky I had some good friends in my time, but I never had a friend who... trusted me so. Every time other folks argue with me this fella just keeps sayin’ do what you want I go along either away”

Jess shrugged and smiled a little.

“Same fella though keeps tellin’ me sometimes bein’ right don’t matter a hoot an’ then he keeps comin’ after me anyway. Kinda got a lot respect for the fells opinion. You comin’ home Jess?”

Jess took a massively deep hard breath. He turned away then hopped on his horse and galloped off. Slim watched Jess ride off,

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his body tight, rigid in the saddle. Slim remounted nearly went into a gallop and then decided maybe Jess needed some space.

An hour later Slim came on Jess sitting against a rock by the side of the road.

Slim pulled up and looked at him.

“So” said Jess as Slim rode up “Ella be mad as all get out if I come...home?”

“Fair chance she won’t come callin’ for six months. Won’t speak to me for most of it” Slim said. “You comin’ home?”

“Yeah” Jess said slowly. “I give up. I ain’t got that much fight in me. I ain’t in my whole life known anyone to go to so much effort to keep me around, just so they can bite off more trouble.” I ain’t sayin’ I’m stayin’ forever.”

Slim looked down at him and smiled. “Yeah I get it” he said.

Jess nodded then stood up hopped onto his horse and turned north.

“Thank you lord for miracles” Slim said under his breath. “And thank you Aunt Ella.”

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They sat around a camp fire, Slim huddled under a blanket in the cold Wyoming air “We’ll be home tomorrow.”

” Home that’s a nice word” Jess said

Slim smiled. “A little while ago you told me something you said to Mrs DeWalt about belonging and now you’re moonin’ over the word home. The big open has almost lost you for good.”

“Yeah well I notice you still like to break away once in a while” Jess answered.

“Often enough to know it’s still out there” Slim agreed

“Don’t try to josh me you never completely lost that itch any more than I have or will” Jess insisted.

“Maybe that’s true but for Andy I can’t scratch that itch as often as you can” Slim said

Jess threw the remains of his coffee on the fire “It’s not too hard to get you on the trail Slim” he said.

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Slim nodded “Just you and one foot in trouble and the other in a barrel of axel grease” he nodded.

“That isn’t so” Jess said indignantly.

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The next day Slim and Jess finally arrived on the top of the ridge where they he could look down at the Sherman ranch in the valley below. They could see movement at the ranch as the stage pulled in, and Andy and Jonsey could just be seen waiting as the stage it pulled up.

Slim took a deep breath watching below. “Home” he said slowly.

It had been a long, long ride home from Tumavaca.”

“Home” Jess said just a touch ironically. He grinned “First thing I reckon I’m gonna do is shoot that old longhorn cow” he said.

“No you’re not” said Slim determined.

“Maybe shoot Ella” said Jess hopefully.

“No you’re not” said Slim less determined.

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Slim half smiled. As Jess started to move he said “Jess , another thing I been meanin’ to say since we left Tumavaca.

Jess frowned “What” he said unhappily.

Slim smiled drily “I know you’reconcerned about Andy maybe thinkin’ you made a fool of yourself, maybe thinkin’ less of you.”

Jess’s eyes narrowed. He clearly was not interested in hearing any lectures on dealing with Andy.

“I feel, I’m obligated to tell you.” Slim pushed “Don’t figure you should worry.”

“Why?” asked Jess so dry his voice rasped.

Slim grinned. “Cause I gotta tell you. When a grown man is screamin’ so bad, that a twelve year old kid has hold onto his pants to keep him from panickin’ he’s gonna drown in three feet of water, it just ain’t humanely possible for a man to look any more foolish.”

As Jess snorted, Slim touched his spurs to his horse and took off at a gallop down the road. After half a second’s indignant hesitation, Jess did the same, galloping wildly down the hill behind Slim.

Home.