

T H E L O N G R I D E O U T

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

TH E S W E E T T A S T E of cold and wood smoke hung in the air. Marlin rode low in the saddle, his shoulders curled against the hungry wind. His hat was pulled down tight and his eyes didn't move as he passed the crude shacks at the edge of town.

He tied his horse in front of the saloon, unwinding his long body as if a sudden movement might snap it. He turned down the collar of his greatcoat and checked to make sure his big Army Colt was loose in its holster. The saloon door was a single chunk of white pine, still oozing sap, and he had to put his shoulder to it to force it open.

The long room inside was quiet, and not much warmer than the street. Clusters of people sat nursing coffee and drinks, talking quietly if they talked at all. Marlin spotted a few farmers the railroad had brought in from Europe: rounded hats, nervous eyes, skin as red as blood. At the far end of the room a half-dozen cowboys turned over cards with patient boredom.

Marlin walked up to the bar. "Whiskey," he said, and when the drink came he tossed it straight down and felt it pull his lips into a grimace. He nodded for a refill.

When he turned to face the room they were all watching him. "I'm looking for a man named Kraamer," Marlin said. "Anybody here know of him?"

One of the cowboys turned casually and rang the spittoon with a stream of tobacco juice. Marlin knew the long, thin face from somewhere, the blond hair that fell limply to his shoulders. He smiled at Marlin and showed his brown-stained teeth.

Marlin felt the lines in his own face, the gray in his hair, the chill in his bones. He was too old for this. He set a half dollar on the bar and started for the door.

"Don't get in a huff," the bartender said. Marlin looked back. "Kraamer lives about a mile west of town. Follow the railroad and take the first trail south."

Marlin touched his hat and went out into the cold.

LE A V I N G H I S H O R S E to follow the tracks, Marlin pulled a grimy telegram from his coat pocket with one gloved hand. It was addressed to the Iron Horse Saloon in Dodge City, and it read: 100 DOLLARS TO ANY MAN WHO CAN FIND MY DAUGHTER. MUST BE HANDY WITH A GUN. ASK FOR KRAAMER, LINCOLN CITY.

The sun was nearly down when he reigned in beside a big sod house, fifty feet long and completely overground. Parched yellow grass grew out of the roof. There was flat prairie in all directions, without a sign that anybody had ever tried to farm it. As Marlin got down a tumbleweed rolled out of the desolate land behind him and hung onto his leg. He kicked it aside and led his

horse to the corral.

"You must be the gunfighter," said a man from the door of the house. He was short and balding, maybe fifty years old. His new denim overalls were already stained and torn.

"That's right. You Kraamer?"

The old man nodded, his corn cob pipe bobbing up and down. "Bit long in the tooth for this line of work, ain't you?"

"I made it this far. There's a lot can't say that."

The old man laughed once, like a cough. "Once you see to your horse, come in and get some supper."

The mud walls of the house gave off a damp smell, but at least it was warm inside. A fire snapped in the stove and Marlin stood in front of it to warm his hands. Two iron-frame beds stood at one end of the single room, and there was a cupboard and a table and chairs near the stove. The furniture was all storebought, light and strong, obviously well-used. In contrast there was a brand-new steamer trunk in the corner.

"Going somewhere?" Marlin asked.

"Had an idea once to travel and see the world. That was before the present trouble, of course. Sit down, I'll find you a plate."

Kraamer talked while Marlin ate, pouring himself shots of whiskey out of a clay jug. "I'm a homesteader," he said. "I guess you already figured that. On the other side of my property is a rancher by the name of Britton. He's got about ten thousand acres, but he won't be happy if he gets a million. North of me is the railroad. Besides my homestead, the government says I can buy 160 acres of railroad land too."

Marlin nodded; it was how the railroads turned their government-granted land into money. It was the reason they brought crowded boatloads of farmers over from Europe and dumped them in this God-forsaken wilderness.

"So I bought me my acres, five years ago. Only now the town's staring to grow up out here, and Britton's got his eye on them. I'm close to the river, and the land is good for this part of Kansas. It's gonna be worth a lot of money someday, someday soon.

"Now my daughter's gone. I know Britton's got her, even if he won't admit it. If I took the deed to my land over there tomorrow, I know I'd get her back."

"How old is she?" Marlin asked around a mouthful of beans.

"Twenty-six. I know what you're thinking. You're thinking she's gone off with some man. I'll tell you something for nothing. Eva loves this land, mister. She would never leave it on her own. Never."

"If Britton wants your land so bad, what's to stop him from taking it?"

"He'd have to kill me first, and that still wouldn't give him the deed. I got nearly a thousand acres, and that deed could be on any one of 'em. Only me and Eva know where it is, and both of us are on the stubborn side. The only thing I'm afraid of is he might hurt her before he finds out how stubborn she is."

Marlin nodded, started to push back his chair, then jumped away from the table. He clawed at his gun as he watched a six-foot diamond-back rattlesnake slither across the floor.

Kraamer ran toward him shouting, "Stop! Don't shoot!" Marlin hesitated, wondering if the old man had lost his mind. "It's just a bullsnake," Kraamer said. "Kills mice, even rattlers sometimes. He won't hurt you."

Marlin holstered his Colt, feeling the skin crawl in the middle of his back. "He's marked uncommon like a rattler."

"No poison," Kraamer said, letting the snake glide over one of his boots. "You could say this here snake's a friend of mine."

THE MORNING SKY looked like snow again as Marlin rode into Britton's ranch. Four cowboys drifted over from the breaking pens as he tied up in front of the house.

"He'p you?" one of them said.

Marlin got down. "I came to see Britton."

Another cowboy said, "Yesterday you was looking for Kraamer. You just like looking for people, or what?" He rubbed his gloved hands together and smiled.

The first cowboy said, "Kraamer, he ain't too pop'lar round here." They all nodded at that. All of them had pleasant expressions on their faces, and holstered guns at their sides.

The second one said, "We sure would hate to think you were working for him or anything." Somehow they had all gotten between him and the house.

"All right," said a voice from the doorway of the house. "Y'all boys get back to work. If you ain't got enough to keep you busy, you talk to the foreman."

The cowboys shuffled away and Marlin climbed the stone steps to the house. The man in the doorway was tall and thick, with white hair like a clump of brush on his head. He wore a clean white shirt and string tie and he didn't seem to notice the cold.

"You Britton?" Marlin asked.

The man nodded. "You from Kraamer?"

"That's right."

"Come on in."

Marlin's boots made a solid sound on the wooden floor. Some walls were rock and mortar, some adobe. A fireplace filled half of one wall and Indian rugs lay in front of it. Marlin sat in a heavy chair and accepted a cup of coffee from a black woman with stiff white hair.

Britton stood with his back to the fire. "What did Kraamer tell you?"

Marlin sipped at his coffee, then rubbed his lower lip. "He said you wanted his land."

"Did he tell you some hogwash about his daughter, too?" Marlin nodded. "I figured. That story of his is all over town. So what's your part in this?"

"I'm not working for anybody just yet," Marlin said. "Once I figure you what's going on, then I'll decide what I want to do about it."

"Fair enough. Here's my side of it." He brushed at the back of his trousers and sat down in a chair like Marlin's. "I've been here a long time. I came west on the Santa Fe Trail thirty years ago. That was back before the railroad, back before everybody went land crazy. My wagon broke down on this very spot and it seemed like a sign. I made it through a hard winter, and by the time spring came I didn't feel like moving on any more. I traded with the Comanche and the Sioux, and later on I fought 'em when I had to. I fought for Statehood too, even though I am a cattleman, because I believe in this country. I believe in railroads, despite the way some men are getting filthy rich off of them. I believe in cities and progress, and I believe only a damn fool would try to get in their way."

“When the railroad came through I had a small spread and I was doing all right. But I realized those railroad cars could be taking cattle to market, and I saw what a man with vision could do here. Land means cattle, cattle means money. Enough money means power, and a chance to make a mark. Lincoln City doesn’t have to go the way of Dodge City and Abilene. It could have an opera house instead of a gallows, schools instead of bordellos.” He looked hard at Marlin. “You have any children?”

“Never worked out that way for me,” Marlin said.

Britton nodded. “My wife took sick carrying our first child. I lost them both. Never had the heart to marry again. But I could make this a town where people that do have families could live in peace.” He waved one hand, as if to clear the air. “Enough of that. About the time I had my vision, Kraamer came along, full of bright ideas and a love of money. That was fifteen years ago.

“To make a long story short, we cut a deal. How much do you know about homestead law?”

Marlin shook his head. “Not much.”

“Well, the law has got its weak spots, like any other. It says a man can stake a claim, wait five years, and sell it. Then he’s free to move on and do the same thing again. Between homestead, preemption, timber grants and what have you, that comes to a lot of land. Which I have bought and Kraamer has gladly sold to me.”

Marlin shifted in the chair, which seemed to be suffocating him. “Where is all this leading?”

“To this. The business I have with Kraamer is between us. He’s no helpless sodbuster being crushed by big cattle interests. Ask anyone in town. The other homesteaders think Kraamer is worse than dirt.

“I don’t have his daughter. He may know where she is, he may not. But she’s just an excuse to bring you into this, to stir things up. All that can happen is that you’ll get hurt or killed. Believe me, Kraamer is just not worth it.”

THE BLOND COWBOY from the saloon was sitting on the fence by the front gate. Marlin reigned in and said, “I used to see you in Dodge. It’s Wallace, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. I heard about you too.” The man’s smile had a greedy look to it.

“That’s a difference between us, Wallace. I’ve always found enough trouble without having to go look for it.”

“You won’t have to look for me,” Wallace said. “I’ll be around.”

THE TOWN OF Lincoln City was a street, a stable, and a few buildings on either side. Paint was apparently in short supply. A brand-new bank sat across from the saloon, and next to it was a diner and a rooming house. Marlin tied up his horse and went into the diner.

The place was empty except for a red-haired boy in his early twenties. Marlin sat at the table next to his and took off his hat. He could hear the wind whistle through cracks in the plank wall.

A waitress came out of the back and wiped her hands on her apron. Marlin pointed at the boy and said, “I’ll have what he’s having.” She was pretty in a strong, capable way, with a thick waist, small breasts, and ribbons tied up in her yellow hair. She smelled pleasantly of scented soap.

When she went back to the kitchen the boy said, “I hear you’re working

for old man Kraamer.” He didn’t look up as he spoke.

“Haven’t made up my mind yet,” Marlin said.

The woman came back with a plate of roast beef and Marlin set to work on it.

“It’s hard,” the boy said, “to tell what’s what sometimes. Being in a strange town and all.”

Marlin sopped up some gravy with his cornbread. “That about says it, all right.”

“Hell, a man might not know where to start.”

“I’d be grateful,” Marlin said, “for any help that might be offered.”

“Of course, it’s hard to help somebody when you don’t know what he’s looking for.”

They ate in silence for another minute, then Marlin said, “This man Kraamer might just be trying to get his daughter back.”

The boy nodded and pushed his plate away. “Then again his daughter might not want to come back.”

“That thought had crossed my mind,” Marlin said. “It’s a shame she’s not around herself, to talk with.”

The woman came back out of the kitchen with a basket of cornbread and set them on the kid’s table. He winked at her as she ruffled up his hair. “This here gentleman,” said the kid, “was wanting to talk to you, Eva.”

“**J**OH NASH,” said the boy, and held out his hand. Marlin took it, half rising as Eva sat at his table. “Me and Eva are going to get married.”

Eva didn’t seem to have heard him. Her gaze was level and penetrating. “What did my father tell you about me?”

“Said you’d been kidnapped by Britton.”

She leaned back and smiled. “Well, I wasn’t.”

“I guess things around here are a bit complicated for me. Your father wants me to find you, and here you are right under his nose. He says Britton’s his enemy, and they’re the next thing to business partners.”

“It’s true Daddy doesn’t know where I am. But that’s because he doesn’t ever come to town, except to the general store. I’m afraid you’ve come all the way from Dodge for nothing. I’ll take care of him myself.”

“Well, that’s fine. But I’d still like to know a couple of things before I go. If you’re daddy’s not afraid of Britton, why’s he so concerned about you?”

“He needs my signature so he can sell off my claim.”

“Your claim?”

“I claimed a quarter section next to Daddy’s five years ago. It’s legal, all right. Daddy put me up to filing the claim and now he thinks he can just sell it to Britton. Only I don’t want to sell. That’s why I left, came to town where he can’t get at me. If I’d of stayed out there he would of made me give it up...whether I wanted to or not.”

“Your daddy hits you?” Marlin said.

“Only when he’s drunk.”

Marlin pushed back his plate and wiped his mouth. “I don’t much care for a man beating up on a woman, family or no. But that ain’t here nor there. If Britton’s got no quarrel with your daddy, what’s that gunslinger from Dodge doing here?”

“Wallace?” She was suddenly nervous. “There’s...some kind of bad blood between Mr. Britton and Daddy. I don’t know what it’s about.” She wouldn’t

look at Marlin.

“Why don’t you tell me the truth?” he asked gently.

She stood up and brushed at her apron. “People got limits, mister. Ain’t it about time for you to move on?”

AT THE BANK next door, Marlin rapped on the teller’s window. The building was as empty as the diner, with room enough for a big city’s business. The one teller had his feet up on the counter and a green eyeshade pulled low. Marlin was becoming impatient for things to make sense.

“Scuse me,” Marlin said. “Who do I talk to about a loan?”

The teller, a thin man with a thin mustache, opened one eye and pointed toward a door.

The man in the back room had a well-fed look, garters on his sleeves, and a short haircut. He had a land map spread out on his desk, with law books holding down the corners. A stove in the corner gave off a cheerful heat.

Marlin said, “I’m just curious. I’m looking for a man who knows about money, somebody I could maybe put a couple of questions to.”

The man looked flattered and said, “What sort of questions?”

“I wondered what land around here is going for. If I wanted to get me a spread here someday, how bad would it be likely to set me back?”

“Well,” the banker said, “government land is a dollar and a quarter and acre, standard price. Then there’s offered land, as they call it under homestead law, and that’s yours for the taking. But I’ll warn you, the last of the offered land went about five years ago. The government land is still around, but none of it close to town or the river. Good land could cost you up to five dollars an acre on the open market. There’s a land office across the street, of course. They might be able to turn something up for you...?”

Marlin shook his head. “Sounds a bit out of my price range. Thank you just the same.”

The banker stood up before Marlin got to the door. “There are, you know, other options...”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, you don’t have to have cash, you see. The principals of the bank are quite willing to lend money with land as collateral.”

“Really? Is that a common practice?”

“Of course. Just the other day...well, I couldn’t go into any details, you understand. But yes, it’s not uncommon at all.”

“How much per acre are we talking about?”

The banker shrugged modestly. “Perhaps as high as...five dollars an acre? Maybe higher?”

“Even for land that didn’t cost that much in the first place? You could still borrow as high as five an acre against it?”

“I don’t quite see what you’re driving at, but yes. The railroad has brought civilization to these parts, and civilization is the magic elixir that turns land into money. God’s not going to be making much more land than we got, I figure, so this bank’s willing to take a risk on the best of it.”

MARLIN PULLED UP a few hundred yards from Kraamer’s house. The front door was slightly ajar and only a thin line of smoke trickled out of the chimney, despite the cold. Marlin got down slowly and dragged his big Army Colt out of its holster.

He pushed the door open with one foot. The inside of the house was dark and musty and smelled of blood. Kraamer lay in the middle of the floor, flat on his back. His empty eyes stared up at the ceiling. There was a bullethole in his chest.

Wallace, Marlin thought. Not likely to be anybody else around that cool and that accurate. One shot, right through the center of the heart.

He put his gun away, turned, and saw the snake. Somebody—no doubt Wallace again—had put a bullet in its head. Half its length still lay in a hole in the wall, but the hole had been dug out and dirt lay all around it. A shovel and an empty metal box, smaller than the diameter of the hole, had been dropped next to the snake.

Marlin used the shovel to dig a shallow grave in the middle of the floor. The ground outside would be frozen solid for months yet. After a moment's hesitation he dragged the body of the snake out of the hole and threw it in the ground next to the old man. He piled dirt over both of them and rode back into Lincoln City.

HE SAT IN the saloon for an hour or so, his greatcoat piled on the chair next to him, blowing into his cupped hands to keep them warm. It was nearly dark when Wallace arrived.

Wallace stood at the bar and downed a shot of whiskey. Trying to look casual, most of the clientele began to move out into the street. "I'll buy you a drink before you leave town," Wallace said to Marlin.

Marlin stood up and walked over to the bar. They were about ten feet apart. "You're a little ahead of yourself. I got business to take care of before I go."

"What business is that?"

"Somebody shot an old man to death this afternoon, and stole the deed to his land. I mean to settle accounts."

"You're wrong, mister. That ain't your business at all."

"Old man Kraamer lied to me, and maybe he wasn't much of a neighbor. But I ate his cooking and slept under his roof, and that counts for something. It's not to do with money, and it's not to do with owning anything, so I guess folks around here might not understand it too well."

"You're about to have the opportunity to join the old man," Wallace said. "And his snake."

Marlin ignored him. "What bothers me, really, is that I misjudged Britton. He seemed a decent sort, too decent to hire scum like you."

"I fight my own fights," Wallace said. He seemed genuinely angry.

"Britton's a coward. He never meant anything but talk, just like you. And I've had enough. Get out or shoot."

It had been leading to this, and Marlin had let it happen. Now he wondered if it had been a mistake. He was old. Still, at the sight of Wallace's grinning face, he felt the cold fire spread through his body. There was a tiny spasm in the ring finger of his right hand where it rested on the bar. This one last time, he told himself. If I live through this I promise I'll never tempt fate again.

Then Wallace reached and so did Marlin. The air of the confined space exploded with the noise of guns and the stink of powder. Marlin was not a one-shot surgeon. He held the Army Colt straight out with both hands and emptied the cylinder.

When it was over he was alive. He looked down to see if he was all in one

piece and saw no blood.

Wallace was dead.

People moved back into the bar, circling like vultures over the body. In the darkening street Marlin could see the snow finally coming down. He pushed through the crowd and pulled a sheet of paper out of the dead man's shirt. He unfolded it, expecting to see the deed to Kraamer's farm. Instead it was a mortgage note from the bank. The bottom edge was damp with blood. "I'll be damned," Marlin said.

Suddenly Eva Kraamer was standing by Wallace's body. She put up her hands and screamed. Tears started in her eyes. Then she dropped to her knees and began to go through the dead man's pockets.

Marlin pulled her aside by one arm. "Here's your paper," he said, holding the mortgage note by one edge. She stared at him for a second or two, her jaw trembling, and then snatched it away.

"Your daddy got greedy, didn't he? Thought he could sell Britton land that had been mortgaged, and by the time Britton found out he'd be long gone, packed up in his brand-new steamer trunk and riding the first train out."

It was a railroad age, Marlin thought. If you just moved fast enough, you wouldn't have to answer for anything. Rockefeller and Gould and Vanderbilt were proof of that. They were building a world that had no place for him.

He shook off the thought and said, "Then Britton got wise. He called Wallace in just to throw a scare into the old man, nothing worse than that. Of course your father didn't know that, and so he sent for me.

"Then you got involved. You figured your daddy was about to wind up dead. I don't think that bothered you too much, only what happens to the money if Wallace kills him? So you had a meeting with Wallace, and by the time it was over, you two had your own deal. Wallace brings the mortgage paper to you instead of Britton, and you cut him in."

Eva seemed to get calmer and calmer as Marlin talked. It told him he had the truth of it. "My only question is," he said, "what were you planning to do with Wallace when you finished with him? You didn't think your boyfriend Nash could handle him, did you? Or did you think he'd just go away once he'd run all your errands for you?"

Finally Eva smiled. "Nash is a sweet boy, but he don't know much about the real world. And neither do you, mister. I might sell my daddy's share, but not mine. I loved that land. Daddy was about to lose it all. Everything I did was just to keep the land that belonged to me.

"And I will keep it, too. You can't prove a thing against me."

Marlin realized he still had hold of her arm. He let it go and said, "Land. You people are crazy. You're all crazy."

He stopped at the bar to put on his greatcoat and take one last shot of whiskey. "You moving on?" the bartender asked.

"That's right," Marlin said. "Back to Dodge."

The man seemed satisfied. "That's a long ride," he said.

Marlin looked at the body on the floor. "Not as long as some," he said. He tossed a coin on the bar and walked out into the falling snow.

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