Summary

Jonesy’s view of the first encounter between Slim Sherman and Jess Harper, as related in 'Stage Stop', 'The Hand You’re Dealt' and 'Lure for a Hawk'. Not a story I expected to write – but Jonesy insisted!

Through the Knothole

by Nomader

Foreword

This is part of an m/m series of stories, as indicated in the Archive Warnings, but forms a contrast to both The Hand You’re Dealt and Lure for a Hawk. The m/m content is minimal in this story in the series. The stories are strictly about fictional characters and not intended to reflect on the original actors.

“You’d better put some elbow grease into that harness, or Slim’ll tie your nose in a knot!”

Jonesy eyed askance the less than energetic way Andy Sherman was tackling his chores. He knew why: he just wasn’t able to do much about it except to humorously admonish the boy. Slim Sherman, of course, would certainly not see any humor in the situation and, given his sense of responsibility,
was also highly unlikely to take the action with which Jonesy had just threatened on his younger brother.

– No, Slim would do nothing so drastic and, dare Jonesy think it, original! Slim, the conscientious, reliable, hard-working brother, would tighten his lips and simply do the job again himself to his own exacting standards. He would never lay into Andy, however irritating and challenging the boy was. What Slim needed was someone to take his frustrations out on. Another adult who, unlike Jonesy himself, was fit and young and able to give Slim a good run for his money. A fight, even! -

“Jonesy, I wonder if in the whole world, anybody’s wasted more elbow grease soaping harness than I have.”

“One comes to mind. Me!”

“The way Slim acts, you’d think this spread was all his. Ever since Pa died –“

Sudden agony shot through Jonesy and it had nothing to do with his bad back.

- Right now, with Matt Sherman’s sons at loggerheads with each other, he did not need reminding of the pain and grief of Matt’s death! Of the hole it had left in his own heart and how such overwhelming grief had killed Mary Sherman too. It had been a terrible time, not least because it came on the wings of war, which had carried Slim so far from them. It had been a lonely, hollow time, from which the ranch was only now recovering. It might have done so more speedily if Slim had come back from the war with a companion, a friend, someone to share the burdens of the daily running of the ranch … -

Jonesy knew Andy was the lucky one. Lucky he was the brother too young to be sent to war, unlike all those kids in the South. Lucky too that his brother had survived when so many had not. Lucky that his brother was a stoic and a stalwart worker, prepared to do anything and everything to sustain his father’s vision for the ranch.

“You’d better thank your lucky stars you’ve got a brother like –“

Their concentration on wrangling about harness and the ranch and the authority of elder brothers was abruptly interrupted by a horse whinnying. Jonesy looked up in surprise.

Close to the corral rail, a bay horse had pulled up. Its rider was loomed over them, blade-lean but nonetheless powerful. His black hat was pulled down over his brows. A coarse cotton shirt covered broad shoulders and chest and worn pants sat on slim hips and muscled legs, a sinewy hardness which spoke of a life spent on the trail. Jonesy guessed the man was several years younger than Slim, but it was difficult to tell because he had such an air of self-confidence and experience.

“Mornin’.” The young man dismounted. “How far’s the next town?” He pushed back his hat,
revealing thick dark hair and a couple of determined eyebrows set over bright blue eyes. The eyes were narrowed in single-minded concentration.

Jonesy decided it was time the stranger took a broader and more relaxed attitude to life. He was not averse to playing the fool to that end. “What d’you mean by town?”

“Place with saloons. Gamblin …’” He leaned on the corral post - casual – as if he were completely harmless.

- *I bet!* – Jonesy thought, appropriately to both the subject and his own long experience in the world.

“You a gambler?” Andy’s voice was eager, longing for some spark of excitement in his long routine day.

- *This might be the opportunity for the boy to get some realistic notion of what life’s like off the ranch. Then again, maybe not.* – To disguise his concern, Jonesy turned back to brushing the horse.

“Lookin’ for a fella that’s got a leanin’ that way. Name of Pete Morgan. Maybe he stopped off here?” The stranger’s voice was eager, determined and his accent was definitely from Texas.

- *Now why would one young man from so far away be searching for another so earnestly? If there was a strong tie between them, one of them sure broke it. If it was some other business, it was probably nothin’ to get involved with. This was a relay station. Folks were always passing through and some of them were good riddance!* - With that thought in mind, Jonesy asked without apparently taking his attention off what he was doing: “Was he ridin’ the stage?”

“Might have been.”

Jonesy turned back to the stranger, who probably didn’t notice the twinkle in the old man’s eyes. “Then he stopped off here.”

“When?”

“D’you say Morgan?”

“Pete Morgan.” The young man’s tone was emphatic, harsh even.

“Never heard of him.”

“Now wait a minute. You said he stopped off here!” The man leant over the corral fence, seizing it with both black-gloved, powerful hands. His expression was deadly serious, his tone uncompromising.

Jonesy was not intimidated. Something told him this youngster would defend rather than threaten an old man and a kid. All the same, something was riding him hard. “Everyone who rides the stage stops off here when they change the horses. Y’see this here’s a relay station for the Great Central Overland mail.”

Andy piped up too: “Pete Morgan? Nope, never met him.”

“Well maybe he got tired of that name. Here’s a picture.” The young man fished in his vest pocket and pulled out a battered photograph, which he handed to Andy. Andy obviously didn’t recognize the man he was looking at. Before Jonesy had a chance to look somehow the picture fluttered to the ground.
The horse he was brushing took exception.

It reared.

The rope dragged away as it reared and lashed out again.

- *Darn’d horses! Critters were always objectin’ to something and showin’ it with their hooves an’ teeth! –*

Scarcely had this thought flashed through Jonesy’s mind than he realized he needed to get out of the way quicker than his bad back would let him. At the same time there was a flash of movement. The stranger vaulted over the fence and grabbed the trailing lead. In seconds he had brought the animal under control, seeming to sooth it with his voice as much as restrain it with the rope.

The horse allowed itself to be led quietly back to the rail.

“What’s the matter, boy, don’t y’ like Mr. Morgan’s looks?” Jonesy asked it sardonically.

The young man grinned ruefully. “More likely it was me that spooked him. I’ve been gettin’ reared up at ever since I hit Wyoming.”

“Oh.” Jonesy’s eyes closed in thought for a moment. – *This youngster might be jokin’, but something’d happened, several somethings by the sound of it, which had made him feel unwelcome in the neighborhood. Maybe something else should be done about that? –*

Andy was there before Jonesy had a chance to open his mouth. “Hey, how about staying? I could fix you up a good hot meal.”

- *Oh, yeah? Since when could Andy cook? –*

Seeing Jonesy’s expression, the boy amended: “Well, hot anyway.”

-That was about the size of it, but there was work t’be done too! –

“As far as I’m concerned, Jonesy, we are ready.” Andy was not going to be deterred from a chance to talk to this stranger. He was already showing signs of hero-worship in his eagerness to share his skill with the animals he had adopted.

To Jonesy’s surprise, the young man was paying close attention to what Andy was telling him and seemed genuinely interested. When he agreed to go and look at the animals, he caught Jonesy’s eye with a little grin and handed him the lead-rope. Like quicksilver, he was back over the fence and telling his horse quietly to stay put, before he followed Andy willingly.

Jonesy stood for a moment looking after them. He had not failed to notice the recent bullet-hole in the right-hand sleeve of the young man’s jacket. Someone had tried to see him off not so long ago and, who knows, they might have had the right idea. But Jonesy’s instincts told him different. He was not sure how this would work out, but one thing was certain, the stranger had been promised a hot meal. Someone was going to have to provide it!

The old cook turned to the one member of the horse family which didn’t automatically attack him and gave vent to his worry, not just on Andy’s behalf but from anticipation of Slim’s probable reaction.
“You jug-headed burro, you got more sense’n that boy. Messin’ about with a loner he don’t know nuthin’ about.”

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Back in his kitchen, Jonesy quickly reviewed the provision he had made for the incoming stage and the return of a ranch owner who would certainly be hungry for his midday meal. There was always plenty of Jonesy’s own brand of stew on the go and the big pot was full today and simmering nicely. He slipped the apple pies he had prepared earlier into the oven, calculating they would be ready just on time.

- The only question was, how much could a hungry young Texan eat before everyone else got to the table? – Jonesy had no illusions about the probable state of nourishment of a man on the drift.

“Can you make it a good, big helping, Jonesy?” Andy sounded tentative and a bit apologetic, but also determined to look after his guest. “I reckon he ain’t been eating too good lately.”

“That figures!” Jonesy observed sardonically. “Y’ take him the same helping as anyone else. Or there ain’t gonna be none for no-one. Not if I know anything about drifters!”

All the same, he did fill the plate a little more than he might otherwise have done. The young Texan was so lean he had to be hungry for anything he could lay his fork into – the two went hand in hand like a hawk hovering over some unsuspecting rabbit! Jonesy had kept very many men fueled and functioning on numerous cattle drives: he wasn’t going to sell a man short at the relay station.

“You gonna manage now?” he asked Andy. There was always more outside work than the three of them could keep on top of. “I’ll get the pies out in a while. Don’t you go tryin’!”

“Sure, Jonesy. I guess Jess ain’t never tasted anything like your apple pie.”

- Exceptin’ the apple pie baked by the last enterprisin’ female who tried to lure him into marriage! – Jonesy was in no doubt there had been plenty of women not averse to a good looking, healthy, strong young man. - All the same, this Jess didn’t look the type to get himself tied down in matrimony. –

All he said was: “I’ll leave one on the side for you. Don’t go givin’ him the whole pie, no matter how appealin’ he looks. There’s cheese in the press there if you ain’t managed to fill him up.”

It was a while later, when Andy was engrossed in the fascinating new skills the stranger could impart, that Jonesy, who had been keeping a wary eye on how the relationship was developing, decided not to interfere and stumped out of the house, back to his tasks in the yard. He was grooming a horse at the corral rail when Slim Sherman rode down the hillside after a hard morning’s work on the range. Jonesy looked up at the sound of hooves, a little slow to respond to the approach, partly through age, partly because his back didn’t hold with jumping to attention, but mostly because he recognized the sound of the approach of his boss, protégé and surrogate son.

“Howdy!”

Slim was never slow to praise hard work. “You’ve got him looking good, Jonesy.”

Jonesy gave the horse a final swipe with the brush and let himself out of the corral.

“Y’know dogs, cats, burros, all four-legged critters like me. But horses –“ he quipped.

Slim looked alarmed, as well he might. “You didn’t get kicked again, did you?”
“No, but a hoof went by me so fast I like got pneumonia from the breeze.” The response was typical of Jonesy – when things got serious, he called on his humor and coolness to deal with the pressures.

Slim was unsaddling his chestnut, Alamo, his back to Jonesy, his mind on the next task which awaited him.

Jonesy, however, wanted to know how his own work had prospered. “How’s that colt that was ailin’?”

“Fat and frisky. You know, that witch’s brew you mixed up for him –”

“Witch’s brew? That’s a scientific formula, I’ve bin tellin’ y’.”

It was a long-time wrangle between them and Slim was always pulling Jonesy’s leg about his medicaments, even if he did appreciate the results. “When science catches up with you, Jonesy, animals are going to live for ever.”

“And people.” Jonesy’s mind somehow flitted back to a certain hole in the sleeve of a jacket and a young man who obviously knew too much of brushes with death. “Y’know if that Doc Hansen would only listen to me, use my remedies –“

But unharnessing Alamo brought Slim abruptly back to practical realities and he inquired sharply: “Where’s Andy? I told him to soap that harness good.”

- Now they were all for it! – Jonesy had good need of his coolness and humor as he told Slim straight: “He’s playin’ poker.”

“WHAT!” Slim gasped, so stunned he pushed back his hat and laid a hand on his own forehead.

“You heard me. He picked up another stray. A two-legged one this time.” Jonesy couldn’t help feeling the latest arrival, despite his obvious experience and survival ability, nonetheless needed some comfort in his life for once.

Slim wrenched the saddle off and stormed into barn. His angry voice floated back to Jonesy, as he railed against the way Andy failed to commit himself to the prosperity of the ranch he part-owned. Jonesy knew how Slim’s mind was working. If they lost the money from the stage company franchise, it would be the end of all their pa, and after him Slim, had sweated and toiled for.

- Everything Matt had dreamed of with a single-minded purpose which outweighed anything, even his love for Mary. -

“Yeah. Grow with Wyoming!” Jonesy quoted as Slim led his horse towards the paddock gate.

It was a saying Jonesy knew was engraved on Slim’s heart and one on which they would flourish or fail. Sure enough, Slim just replied shortly, “That’s the way Pa had it planned.”

“Y’ pa and you always wanted to be ranchers and nuthin’ else.” Jonesy had hit the nail right on the head there, not surprisingly considering how well he had known and loved Matt Sherman. With his next statement, he tried, not for the first time, to help Slim understand his younger brother. “Maybe Andy sees things different. Everybody looks at the world through his own knot-hole.”

Slim scowled, an expression with did not suit his usually pleasant and cheerful face, but one which was becoming increasingly frequent as there seemed to be no answer to stresses of his responsibilities.
Jonesy heaved an inward sigh. – There was an answer. Slim needed a right-hand man, just like Jonesy had been to Matt. But it was a mystery where one was to come from. Good hands, never mind good friends, didn’t just drop in out of the blue … or maybe sometimes they did? -

His mind was brought abruptly back to the worry Slim was carrying about the temptations of the town and particularly all the fuss over the trial of one of Bud Carlin’s gang.

“When I’m in Laramie, you see he keeps away from that knothole he looks through. I don’t want him coming into town,” Slim snapped.

“Can’t blame him much for wantin’ to go.”

“And Jonesy, you see to it he studies his books while I’m away. That boy’s going to amount to something, whether he wants to or not!”

Jonesy made no answer to this, just heaved another shrewd and affectionate sigh and forbade to point out the contradiction in Slim’s ambitions for Andy’s future: being a good rancher or amounting to something better. – Either way, it was Andy’s choice! – But Jonesy still wondered how he could help Slim take a broader view when handling Andy’s growing rebellion against the routine and confines of the ranch.

So they were silent as they walked up to the ranch house. Slim, Jonesy knew, was not averse to a friendly game of poker himself, but he didn’t play often nor was he conversant with the shadier aspects of the game: such actions he would naturally feel impugned his innate honesty. It was just unfortunate that they walked in on the drifter explaining how to deal off the bottom of the pack.

Jonesy and Slim exchanged looks – Slim startled and indignant, Jonesy humorous and resigned. Jonesy knew Slim would be affronted by the open admiration and friendliness with which Andy was regarding this stranger. - Wide-eyed wonder at the man’s skill with cards was only goin’ to deepen this wound. Shermans earned an honest living by the sweat of their bodies, not by cheatin’ round a card table! -

Andy knew he was on shaky ground with his elder brother and protested: “We’re just fooling around. We’re not playing for money.”

The Texan looked up, his bright blue eyes glinting sardonically as he challenged Slim. “The way I figure it, if y’are goin’ to play for money, y’d better learn all the tricks, so you can spot ‘em.”

The way Jonesy figured it was you needed to know more about the man you were baiting before you got in too deep. “Yeah. Either that or don’t tangle with strangers.”

“I’d like t’ have a nickel for every man that’s been hornswoggled in a friendly game.”

“Could be.” Jonesy had to admit the drifter was talking sense, but Slim would never see through that knothole. – Shermans were on good terms with their neighbors and Slim was not goin’ to take kindly to the notion of actions which implied otherwise! -

Slim took no notice of this remark. His sharp gaze lighted on the remains of the meal Andy and Jonesy had provided, doubtless wondering if there was any left for the passengers and deciding to go hungry himself in order to provide the service which sustained the reputation of the relay station.

Andy eagerly tried to smooth things over. “Slim, meet Jess Harper.”

“I’ve already had the pleasure.” Slim’s voice was as cold as the north wind and about as friendly. – If he got any pleasure out of that meeting, Jonesy was gonna eat his own bowler hat! -
“Why didn’t you tell me?” Andy turned to his stray in surprise. Jonesy saw Slim winch at the obvious hurt and jealousy in his brother’s eyes.

“How did I know you were brothers? Ain’t no family resemblance at all!”

- It was true enough. Y’ couldn’t blame the man for not realizin’, although Jonesy doubted it would have made the slightest difference to his behavior. The young Texan had so clearly taken to Andy and he was one who was always gonna play by his own rules.

Andy, likewise, was not going to obey his big brother’s orders to make himself scarce. “I got company, Slim!” The boy sounded proud and defiant, as if he had just discovered he did have some rights on the ranch, including the right to choose his own friends and be hospitable to them.

As if he recognized the importance of backing Andy’s decision, the Texan remained at the table, showing no signs of moving on. Andy’s chin was thrust defiantly up as he confronted his brother. Slim was glaring at the intruder with the obvious intention, possibly a foolhardy one, of removing him by physical force. They were like gunfighters facing each other down the street and Jonesy was willing to bet Jess Harper had done just that more than once.

Looking at Slim’s resolute, angry face and braced stance, Jonesy was vividly reminded of his first real encounter with Matthew Sherman senior – Matt, his life-long friend and companion, the man he had followed willingly from the cattle trails they had ridden together to this frontier country of Wyoming. It was on the first trail they rode, both young and with a yen for wide horizons, that they stood side by side for their principles. Matt had been defying the intention of his trail boss and the other hands to lynch a young Comanche accused rustling the herd. But there was no evidence apart from finding the young brave hiding and nursing an injured leg. No-one seemed to care much about the truth except Matt – and Jonesy, who had driven his chuck wagon into the middle of the confrontation. As a young man whose life had been shaped by the problems with his back, Jonesy was not about to see another be crippled from lack of care. Young though he was, he’d studied doctoring at every opportunity and was confident in his ability to heal. Now he got stiffly down from the wagon and, ignoring the angry men crowding round, examined the injured leg of the hostile brave, after which he observed: “This ‘un sure ain’t bin cuttin’ out no steers by hoppin’ round ‘em!” His apt wit made both Matt and the trail boss laugh. After which the boss was no doubt moved to deal justly with the Comanche by Jonesy’s threat of no edible food for the next hundred miles unless the boy got proper treatment!

Just as he had done then, Jonesy spoke up to defuse the situation: “The stage’ll be here in ten minutes, let’s go fix up.” He steered Slim firmly through the door into the bedroom.

Slim did not resist. Maybe his common sense told him there was no point in getting into a fight, but he was still highly disturbed by Andy’s choice. “Yes sir, that boy’s a rare judge of character!”

Jonesy could easily have disputed this. Andy had inherited a goodly portion of his mother’s sensitivity and perception. Mary would never turn away a stray, human or animal, but would always give anyone she met the benefit of the doubt. And for some reason, they nearly always responded well to her trust and friendliness. Jonesy felt Andy was the keeper of her principles in the family.

“Where d’y meet that fella, Slim?”

“Out on the south range this morning. Acting kind of ornery.”

Jonesy was not impressed. He was pulling on the stiff collar to his shirt and it reminded him that Slim could be equally stiff and restrictive about his legal rights, if not called to task on his attitude: “And how d’you act? Kind of cordial-like?”
Slim was not going to give up his moral position easily. This was not the first time Andy had challenged his authority. “Andy cottons on to every no-good saddle tramp that comes along!”

“He’s just a kid. So are you.” Jonesy was watching Slim’s every move as he himself smartened up for the arrival of the stage. Predictably, his observation did not meet with any positive reaction. It didn’t stop him offering advice which might help to stem Andy’s frustration: “Y’know what I’d do?”

“No, what?”

“T’d take him to Laramie. He needs a little excitement every once in a while.”

“Oh, fine. Maybe we can fix it so he has a showdown with Bud Carlin.” The irony of this comment was to strike them both very soon.

“Be all right if y’ keep him inside.” Jonesy was clutching at straws here.

“Inside of what? Nothing there but saloons and a hotel with wide-open gambling.”

But Slim was not unreasonably stubborn. When Andy came in looking for his canteen, he only gave vent to his irritation that he’d been the one who had to clean it out by adding: “It sure needed it too.”

Jonesy grimaced and sighed at this continued disapproval of Andy’s priorities, even though the rebuke was justified. His reaction went totally unnoticed as Slim reined in his principles with commendable patience and made the offer of some excitement which Jonesy’d suggested. “You can stay with Doc Hansen.”

Hoping to help Andy accept this invitation to life outside the ranch, Jonesy put in quickly. “Or in the hotel with you.”

Slim could be seen making a mighty effort and agreed: “Or in the hotel with me.”

To both their surprise, Andy turned the offer down and with some familiar reasoning. “Like you’ve been telling me, it wouldn’t be right to leave Jonesy alone.”

Jonesy nearly choked on the drink he was taking but recovered enough to protest: “All right by me. Give me a chance to make up another batch of that lineament you’re always kicking about. The one that stinks up the kitchen.”

Andy was not a bit appreciative of Jonesy’s support. “I don’t wanna go, Jonesy!” He was vehement. “I changed my mind.” The boy offered no explanation for changing his mind and refusing. Just slammed out of the bedroom again, yelling: “I don’t know, I just did!”

Slim scowled. “I think I know why.”

“Why?”

“He wouldn’t want his canteen unless he was planning on going somewhere, would he?”

“That’s right.” Jonesy deliberately kept his voice casual, trying very hard not to sound bothered. Maintaining his ‘nothing to get all roiled up about’ attitude, he bent to tidy the rug on bed. Slim, on the contrary, went straight to the bottom drawer, which contained Andy’s clothes and behind which Slim knew he kept his treasured possessions. It took no time at all to find that Andy’s savings and his father’s watch were not there.
Jonesy was seriously alarmed at the obvious violence of Slim’s feelings about this revelation and warned hastily, “Slim, take it easy!”

He might as well have saved his breath to cool his porridge. Slim dashed out of bedroom. Jonesy followed as quick as his limp would let him.

The Texan was still sitting at the table, idly shuffling the pack of cards.

- Now why ain’t he made himself scarce while the going was good? – Jonesy wondered. – Second time he’s butted heads with Slim and it ain’t as if Slim’s actin’ ready to swear they’re blood brothers! -

If Slim Sherman did swear, he might well have been moved to do so now. Instead he was on the stranger before he could react, grabbing his gun from the holster. Jonesy winced at the physical violence, not least because he was pretty sure the drifter could hold his own, and maybe more, against Slim, who just snarled: “I’ll keep the gun this time.”

- Risky! – Jonesy opined, but silently. He waited with interest to see how Slim would get rid of the intruder, who would certainly not leave without his gun. As it was, the stranger was infuriated in his turn and jumped to his feet in an instant, braced for action like a young bull about to charge.

“Slim!” Andy’s cry of protest passed almost unnoticed by the two angry young men. Slim was just hell-bent on the confrontation and the Texan was more than willing to give it him.

“Your company’s leaving, Andy and you’re staying.”

The statement halted the drifter in his tracks and Jonesy saw that he had suddenly realized his own impact on Andy’s determination to quit the ranch. “Is that why you went in there, to tell him you were goin’ with me?” He sounded genuinely shocked.

Andy shook his head dumbly. Slim looked taken aback. Jonesy decided it was time they all lightened up!

“He put two and two together, added 8 dollars and a solid gold watch, and that’s the answer he come up with!”

“And he never comes up with the wrong answer, does he?” Four-square and scowling, the stranger was not going to back down.

“Not this time, he didn’t.” The cold contempt and dislike in Slim’s voice surprised and disappointed Jonesy.

“I say y’ did.” The Texan’s bright blue eyes blazed with fury.

Their gaze locked and they glared at each other. It was like watching two bulls lock horns in a struggle for supremacy – a broad, solid Hereford and one of those sinewy, swift black bulls of the Mexican corridas. - Well at least neither of them ain’t a longhorn! - Jonesy silently shook his head at the failure of a possible friendship. – Just when they could have used another strong, experienced hand around the place. Not to mention someone who could meet Slim on his own ground as an equal. – This was certain to be a conflict in which neither of them would yield.

Anger and distrust filled the usually hospitable living room of the ranch house. The owner had no intention of allowing unwanted guests to linger.

“You get out of here. Go on, get!” The threat in Slim’s tone was unmistakable. Jonesy just wondered
how Slim was going to make good his order.

The drifter leapt to Andy’s defense as swiftly as if Slim had actually physically threatened the boy. “So you can start beatin’ up on him?”

Jonesy was shocked. Matt had never disciplined his sons like that and Slim had never laid a hand on Andy in anger. – But someone beat this young man when he was a kid, good ‘n hard enough for it to make such a life-long mark! – But he did not have a second to reflect on this, for Slim had grabbed the drifter and tossed his gun to Jonesy, who caught it by sheer reflex.

The Texan staggered back against the wall and Slim’s body slammed into him. The two grappled together as if they had done it many times – as if it was merely play, horsing about. But it was not. The stranger flung his fists up, ready to swing at Slim, but he never got a chance, not then anyway.

“Stay right where y’ are!”

The voice from the doorway froze them all. For it continued: “I’m Bud Carlin. I don’t like to trouble y’ but me an’ my friends are hungry. What’s for dinner?”

Slim’s angry suggestion about Andy having a showdown with the outlaw was about to come true – for all of them.

* * * * * *

The next they knew they were all lined up against the fireplace as Carlin mocked and joked at their and everyone else’s expense. Jonesy had plenty of dry wit and was not afraid to use it, even under the relentless pressure of the outlaw’s interrogation and the fact that he was waving in Jonesy’s face a plate of the food Jonesy had prepared for decent folks! He could play the good old cook, too, listing the reasons and conditions which might slow up the arrival of the stage – listing them very slowly and as dumbly as he could muster.

- The trick was to slow Carlin down without actually provoking him into some kind of retributive action. -

Sure enough, Carlin eventually had enough. “Oh shut up!” He turned to Jess, who was next to Jonesy, demanding a definite time.

Jonesy tensed, wondering what would happen now. - Would Jess be rash enough to defy the outlaw or just try to get out of the whole mess by siding with him? - He did not fear that the Texan would leave them in the lurch: in his heart Jonesy already understood that Jess would never desert Andy unless he saw some chance to get help. And there was no way Carlin was going to let anyone escape!

As it turned out, Jess too had his own attitude to dealing with Carlin – cool, casual, unconcerned: “I wouldn’t know.”

Faced with this unsatisfactory response, Carlin gestured to his henchman to use some force to get the answers he wanted. Jonesy could see Clint was set to punch Jess hard and found himself involuntarily moving to stop the blow, when Andy answered in the nick of time with the required details.

“More pie!” Carlin ordered Slim.

- The kitchen sure was takin’ a beating, but better the food than the four of them. The only problem was … -
“There isn’t any more,” Slim stated truthfully.

Jonesy’s head went down, wishing he’d baked enough pie for an army if it would keep Carlin sweet. The man just gestured to Clint. “You go in the kitchen and see.” The result was, to Jonesy’s heartfelt thanks, just as Slim had said.

“Any whiskey around here?” Carlin demanded.

Jonesy hastened to volunteer in his slow, confused tones: “Might be … in my canteen … for snake-bite.”

- Carlin sure was a snake in his own right! And too canny to get bitten by one, more’s the pity.

“Where is it?”

“Saddlebag … in the barn. Want me to go get it?” Jonesy began to move towards the door.

Carlin’s hand on his shoulder pushed him back. “There might be a horse in the barn too, Paul Revere.”

There was nothing to do except ignore the disrespect and keep calm. He just hoped the two young men wouldn’t try any kind of heroics of the sort which, outnumbered as they were, would just get them all killed. Slim, Jonesy knew, was long-headed and beside him he could sense the taut control the Texan was keeping on his temper, even though he looked calm and cool, even slightly bored. But he kept sneaking glances at Slim, and, to Jonesy’s satisfaction, Slim responded, so that silently a positive bond was forming between them. It was clear they just needed an opportunity, enmity forgotten, to act together.

The announcement by the outlaw who had been outside that a horse needed shoeing seemed to present an opportunity.

“Who’s good a shoeing a horse?” Carlin demanded.

“I am!”

“Me too!” Jonesy spoke almost on top of Slim

Carlin was too astute to take volunteers: “You’re too anxious.” His eyes flicked along the line. “You two!”

It was up to Jess Harper now to protect Andy and prevent him trying anything rash when the pair of them got out to the barn. There were rifles out there and Andy knew it. Jonesy felt Slim’s tension ratchet up along with his own as they strained to listen for the sound of gunfire.

Mercifully, there was none.

Jonesy moved stiffly away from the window, favoring his back as he did so, trying to break up the target which Clint could keep his eye on.

“Let him sit down, he’s got a bad back,” Slim said at once.

It was to no avail. Clint was not impressed.

“Wish that stage’d hurry up,” Jonesy muttered, taking another glance out of the window.

“It may be the last one. This could cost us the franchise,” Slim reminded him unnecessarily.
One hint that they’d co-operated with Carlin and they could say goodbye to the stage-line income, always supposin’ they were alive and sayin’ anything at all, of course! –

“More stew and add plenty of pepper!” Clint demanded.

Jonesy took the plate, just for once letting his feelings show by the foreboding look on his face. As he went into the kitchen, he was running through some of the other things he could add to the stew, which might give Clint a nasty surprise and possibly incapacitate him too. He considered and discarded several possibilities, finally picking up the tin containing a strong emetic powder.

- The question was, was it worth it? Would it mean Carlin’s wrath and certain revenge? It had to be worth a try! -

But he’d scarcely loosened the lid when the rattle of wheels and hooves interrupted his plans. A few grains hit the stew, but it was too late now. He was summoned back into the living room, to find Jess was being hustled back inside as the stage arrived.

- That left Andy on his own to deal with it. On his own the youngster could do nothing and Jonesy hoped fervently he wouldn’t try! -

Carlin was at window watching stage pull up. There was sneering satisfaction in his voice as he remarked, “His Honor, Thomas J. Wilkins.”

Jonesy, Slim and Jess all stared out of the window too. Andy was talking to the only man to alight from the coach. The man looked puzzled and slightly impatient. Jonesy looked hard at Slim and Slim looked back. Jess had his gaze turned down, as if defeated, although Jonesy was willing to bet he wasn’t. The two younger men exchanged quick looks too and then focused their attention on the judge as he was ushered in. Jonesy quite deliberately checked to see where Clint was, wishing the new ingredient in the stew would act fast or maybe just poison him once and for all.

Thomas J. Wilkins was all unsuspecting.

– For an astute man o’ the world, he certainly ain’t quick at pickin’ up clues! – Jonesy muttered silently to himself. – Y’d think he knew enough about outlaws t’ recognize one when he saw one! –

All the same, he felt personally every jibe and sneer as Carlin proceeded ruthlessly to humiliate the representative of the law. Quite apart from anything else, there was no respect of age. But then Jonesy had already experienced that. At least the judge was prepared to stand up for his profession, even at the cost of his own life: “If you kill me, there’ll be other judges. You can’t kill them all.”

It was a bold statement. One Jonesy hoped the man did not have to live up to. Things certainly looked grim for him as Carlin exercised his grotesque sense of humor. A refusal to part with his coat sent the judge sprawling at Slim’s feet. Characteristically, Slim did not hesitate to help him up. Jonesy nodded inwardly in approval: - Matt’s son was inspired with his father’s passion for justice. And he would never fail to help those in need, if he could. – But it did no good. Moments later Carlin, not content with merely taking the man’s coat, added another twist to his perverse amusement.

“Only one thing wrong. Dirty boots. Shine ‘em!”

Jonesy turned away hastily towards window, lest his surge of angry disgust show on his face. He turned back quick enough, though, just in time to catch another determined glance flashing between the two young men in whose co-operation he now really trusted.
“On y’ knees, judge – do it right.” Carlin was in his element, but it might mean a moment of inattention from which they could profit. “Remind me to give you a good tip, y’ honor!”

Carlin and Clint both roared with laughter.

Slim exchanged a lighting look with Jess, then they both instantly turned on the two outlaws. Slim flung himself at Carlin, knocking him to the floor. He was more than a match for his opponent, but not for the butt of a rifle. Clint struck a glancing blow, which stunned Slim enough to make him release Carlin. Jess lunged forward to support him, only to be faced with two armed men, which put paid to his efforts.

Jonesy was holding his breath, waiting for Carlin to order Clint kill to Slim for overpowering him. It did not happen. Instead he himself became Carlin’s next focus.

“How much time we got? Well go to the window, Paul Revere!”

“Lead horse is actin’ up a bit. Might take a spell.”

Slim’s attack seemed to have amused rather than angered Carlin. Despite his desire for the stage to be on time, he said: “Good. Let’s have some fun while we wait.”

The other man hauled Slim up, twisting his arm painfully behind his back. “Hit ‘im, Bud!”

“You know me, Clint, I like to watch.” Carlin was grinning devilishly as he turned to Jess and reminded him, “You were squarin’ up with old Slim here.”

Jonesy caught Jess’s eye over Carlin’s shoulder. He had no idea what the Texan was thinking, it was one of the times when a poker-face came in very handy, but he sensed a profound reluctance to continue to fight under these circumstances. – Maybe sidin’ together against Carlin has made the pair of ’em strike some kind o’ spark between them, instead o’ strikin’ each other? –

It did not look as though they were going to have any choice about coming to blows, though. Jonesy saw Jess risk another brief eye contact with Slim as Carlin ordered: “Take it up where y’ left off.”

“We were just horsin’ around,” Jess said quickly.

“Horse around some more!” Carlin moved back towards the window to give them space. “Now I wanna see a good right to the jaw. All y’ might.”

Jess might be the smaller of the two, but he was lean and powerful and Jonesy had no doubt he was capable of doing Slim some serious damage, because Carlin had left Slim no chance to defend himself. Jonesy saw Slim look across at Carlin, then over his shoulder to see where Clint was standing and if he was likely to join in. Then he looked directly at Jess, a strong and determined look, but one which was full of trust too.

“Well, go ahead. Hit me.”

Jonesy’s eyes went from Slim to Jess, willing them to find some way out of hurting each other. – Was there any way he himself could divert attention, stop the fight before it drew needless blood? – He stared hard at the worn floorboards beneath their boots as if he could cause a trap door to open up and whisk them out of sight. Then he raised his eyes to Jess again. Although Jonesy was only looking at the young Texan’s back, he could see hard muscles drawn even tighter in anticipation and an angry reluctance which was palpable.

- Guess the boy’s gonna hafta strike. Hope he can fake it! -
Sure enough, Jess’s fist swung back and flashed out, making contact just slowly enough to let Slim react as if the blow had been a hard one, rather than glancing off him.

Carlin was not fooled. “I said all your might. I’ll give you one more chance. You’ve got one more second.”

Jess had pulled back but was now forced to repeat his attack. Slim was frowning with determination, ready for anything. – Nothing less was to be expected from Matt Sherman’s son! -

“Well, what are you waiting for?”

This time Jess’s blow carried more power.

– Hell, I bet that still ain’t anything compared with what the kid could really do if he tried! –

As if they had practised it together, Slim deliberately went stumbling backwards.

“Y’ rolled with the punch!” Carlin observed as he hauled Slim back for further punishment. “This time I want y’ to stand right there and take it. If y’ don’t – “ Suddenly his gun was in his hand, pointing unwaveringly at Jonesy: “Paul Revere bites the dust.”

Jonesy straightened up. His back was agonizing, but if he had to die now, he was going to go with dignity, face to face with his enemy. – If that miserable joker saw fit to abuse and mock their country’s history and legendary battles like he did the law, Jonesy would never give him the satisfaction of seeing him flinch. He might be no Paul Revere, but he had lived with Shermans long enough to have a fine sense of honesty and loyalty. He was not sure what Jess would do, but he knew Slim would goad the Texan into fighting for the sheer sake of Jonesy’s life. –

To make things worse, at that moment Clint announced the stage was ready to leave and Andy was coming back inside.

“You’ve got three seconds.” Carlin started counting.

“Hit me!”

“Harder than last time or it don’t count.”

“Hit me!”

Jess’s blow ripped through the tension binding them all as he hit Slim a third time. The power-packed punch sent him sprawling, knocking him out more surely than any rifle blow had. Jess immediately swung towards Carlin and Clint, his blue eyes blazing, only to be halted by their guns. Clint slammed back a punch into him which sent Jess flying and without more ado the two outlaws quit the ranch house.

Seconds later a shot rang out and Jonesy’s heart jumped into his mouth, but mercifully Andy rushed through the door and ran to Slim and shook him. At least both brothers had survived – and so it appeared had their guest and ally, who was now scrambling to his feet.

The guard herded Jonesy and Jess back where they started and did not allow Andy to comfort Slim: “Get over there with them! Hurry it up!”

Jonesy put his arm round Andy, his hand dropping to his hip, partly in defiance, partly in search of the gun he didn’t carry.
The man who did have the gun addressed them all: “This here’s a mighty fine rifle. Step outside while I got y’ in sight and y’ll find out.”

* * * * * * *

The moment the guard went out there was a concerted rush to help Slim. Well, the youngsters rushed and Jonesy limped as quickly as he could. Andy dropped down close to Slim and Jess knelt on the other side. In the moment it took him to cross the floor after them, Jonesy saw Jess’s dark head bent close to the fair one beneath him and sensed the flow of strength and comfort from one man to the other. – Lord knew he and Matt had shared just such an exchange often enough, facin’ more than could be faced alone. –

Jess gripped Slim’s arm, as if to help him up, but when this proved too much for Slim, Jonesy saw his hand slide up the arm to rest on Slim’s broad shoulder instead. Jess was watching Slim’s face closely, as the older brother responded to the reactions of the younger – his gaze was quiet and intent, not interfering, just supporting them in their heartfelt relief that they had survived.

A few seconds later, Slim shifted so that he could look up at Jess and Jonesy, watching from behind him, guessed that he smiled because Jess’s blue eyes brightened even more and a little half-smile curved his lips in response.

“Thanks for missing my nose!”

- Considerin’ how much punishment y’ve taken, I guess something restorative’s needed. –

On this thought Jonesy turned away and went back into the bedroom. It seemed a lifetime since he had stood here with Slim, debating Andy’s freedom. – Well he sure got to have that showdown with Carlin! – In the event, Jonesy was proud of the way Andy had responded to the encounter with all its threats and violence; the boy had kept calm and done his best, that was all anyone could ask.

He fished in his boot and brought out the bottle of whiskey he kept there. Not for snake bite, but definitely for purposes medicinal – most of the time. Something about the level in it suggested Slim had been in need of a restorative not so long ago!

As he opened the door again, Jonesy heard the judge, whom they had all completely forgotten about in their concern for Slim, murmur brokenly: “I’m a coward!” Before anyone could respond with denial or consolation, Jess Harper spoke firmly and decisively: “Acceptin’ what has to be, your Honor, ain’t bein’ a coward.”

Jonesy nodded sagely in approval of this succinct and realistic statement. – Wonder what taught him such wisdom? – he thought, but his main concern was Slim. He shook the bottle meaningfully and said: “Someone’s taken a swig of it.”

Andy hastily asserted: “Wasn’t me!”

- As if that was likely! -


“From now on, medical purposes only!”

Slim seized the bottle in both hands and had a good swig of whiskey. Then he went back to leaning into Jess’s support for a moment. But there was no time to lose. Slim struggled to his feet with Jess’s help, while Jonesy and Andy hovered anxiously. Andy seemed to think Slim could hardly stand up, but Jonesy knew even if this were true, Slim was made of stern stuff!
“We’ve got to get to Laramie before they do. Will you ride with me?” Slim’s eyes locked with Jess’s once again, in fervent appeal and trust.

“You won’t have a chance.” The Texan’s reply was practical and ruthless.

“I think he’s right – the horses are out in the pasture,” Jonesy ventured reasonably.

Slim ignored Jess’s response as absolutely as if a wall had suddenly reared between them. Instead he turned to Andy and Jonesy, the ones he knew and could rely on: “I’m going after them!” He immediately made for the door and Jonesy followed him, unwilling to let him take this risk alone.

“I could make it with y’, Slim!”

“With that bad back?”

Somehow they were all tumbling out into the yard, where the dust from the departure of the guard had hardly settled. Slim was thinking on his feet: “Get the guns from the barn, Jonesy.”

“Slim, you can’t –“

“Bring them up to the pasture.” Slim’s glance flicked over the body lying in the yard. “Take care of him, will you, Jonesy? I can’t stop to help. They’ve too much of a lead already!”

“Just stay wide of that stage if you catch up with it!” Jonesy headed for barn as fast as his bad back would let him.

“He won’t do it, Jonesy – he’ll wade right into them.” Andy called after him, beside himself with fear for his brother. He turned in appeal to the Texan, who was shrugging into his jacket. “Please, Jess!” Andy’s voice was almost a wail. “He won’t have a chance alone. Maybe one day you’ll be in a jam –“

“Yeah! And have to get out of it on my own, like I always have.”

Jonesy just caught the reply and would be ready to swear it was true, even on such a short acquaintance. But there was urgent need to find the guns Slim needed.

This done, he hobbled back past the arguing pair as quickly as he could, and took the weapons to Slim. His young boss mounted up eagerly and disappeared down the road at a flat-out gallop. As Jonesy came back from the pasture he was just in time to hear Andy’s bitter and vehement condemnation of Jess’s refusal to help Slim as the boy stormed back into the house, slamming the door behind him.

Jonesy still held Jess’s gun. “Are y’ goin’ with Slim?”

“No!"

- Y’ disappoint me, boy! And y’ain’t goin’ anywhere with a gun, if it ain’t to help Slim. Y’ may not care for him, but Slim’s worth all y’ve got to give! -

Jonesy brushed past Jess and headed for the pasture again. - He just knew he was going to have trouble catching one of those durned critters. –

Having untied his bay, Jess followed Jonesy over to the paddock gate.

“Y’ ain’t gonna catch Slim up now,” he remarked conversationally, as he tightened the cinch on the saddle. “And tryin’ ain’t gonna help a bad back none, either.”
Jonesy turned and stared at him, his mind working overtime. Suddenly the real reason for Jess’s refusal dawned on him with blinding light. – There was no way Jess didn’t care, for justice or for Slim! –

“You goin’?”

Jess nodded.

“Y’ didn’t want Andy taggin’ along,” Jonesy observed shrewdly.

Jess nodded again. “Just give me my gun, Jonesy. I’m feelin’ mighty bare without it.”

A delighted smile split Jonesy’s worried face. The situation was still drastic, but Jess could handle it much better than he himself ever would. He handed over the gun without hesitation.

“Keep Andy here!” Jess ordered. “I don’t care if y’ have to lock him in the outhouse. Just don’t let him know where I’m goin’! And no chasin’ off after Slim on his own, either!”

“I guess I can do,” Jonesy agreed. “Now get goin’, will y’! Time’s a-wastin’!”

Jess hopped up to the saddle and turned his mount towards Laramie.

“Jess!”

“Yeah?”

“Good luck! Slim needs all y’ fire-power and y’ backin’ right now. Don’t let him down!”

Jess’s voice floated back to Jonesy as he surged out of the yard: “Trust me for that!”

* * * * * * *

As the dust of Jess’s departure swirled into the air, Jonesy stood gazing down the road for some minutes. His heart and mind were both praying for the safety of the two young men – one he had known all his life and one he had known for all of three hours. Time did not matter. Their quality and value did. Jonesy could not put a price on the feeling of rightness which kept assaulting him, even though his shrewd and realistic mind told him not to jump the gun.

- Jess Harper sure knew how to use a gun. Y’could tell just by the way he wore it. Like he said, he was naked without it. With it, Slim’d be hard pushed to find a better partner in his fight. –

He sighed and shrugged, too wise to waste energy trying to predict the future. - What would be, would be – sure as a hawk dived or a bull charged. – He turned and stumped across the yard towards the house. – Now he just had to deal with Andy! All very well for Jess to order … -

The front door opened and Judge Thomas J. Wilkins came out on to the porch with Andy at his side. He was talking earnestly to the youngster.

“If you think so badly of that young Texan, you’ve got a lot to learn about judging men, my boy.”

Andy scowled and bit his lip. Jonesy hastened to join them.

“Where do you think he is now?” the judge asked, looking around the yard.

Andy shrugged. “Ridden off.”
“Where?”

“Wherever a no-good saddle tramp would wanna go!”

Judge Wilkins bent and took Andy’s chin in his fingers, making him look up and meet his stern but kindly eyes. “And why would he do that?”

“He doesn’t care about Slim!” Andy almost shouted, pulling away from the grip. “He’d let him get … killed!” The words were almost a sob. “He said they weren’t friends.”

“Sometimes a man can be much more without being a friend – yet,” the judge said quietly.

“He can? I don’t see how.”

“No, that’s because you didn’t see him when Carlin made them fight.”

“They fought?” Andy was horrified. “Is that why Slim was hurt so bad?” His anger at Jess returned in full force.

“Carlin tried to make … Jess, is his name? … tried to make him hurt your brother, but he didn’t succeed.”

“Played it out together like dancin’ partners,” Jonesy put in drily.

“P – p – partners?” Andy’s eyes were wide.

“Yeah, Jess could’ve hurt him real bad –“ Jonesy looked at the judge, who nodded in agreement. “But he sure didn’t.”

“I think that young man was using his brain,” Judge Wilkins affirmed. “Keeping Carlin happy without doing too much damage.” He paused a moment and added feelingly, “Jess knew when giving in to Carlin’s demands would give him the long chance. He was prepared to let that criminal have his way if it opened an opportunity to take him down later. We must trust he’s actively trying to do so now.”

“But we don’t know,” Andy sighed.

Jonesy and the judge exchanged another long look. Jonesy nodded, but Andy didn’t see.

“That’s what trust is about,” the judge told the boy.

“And we’re trustin’ Slim will come home,” Jonesy said firmly. “Y’ brother’s given us a job to do here and now. He’ll expect to find it done. Andy, get me a strong tarpaulin from the barn – we ain’t gonna be able to lift a body, but we can still move him somewhere seemly. Then fetch me a clean sheet and bring it outside. Judge, we’ve got a man who needs our honest care.”

As they stepped down from the porch to attend to the fallen guard, Judge Wilkins murmured, “Honest and honorable, like the place he fell in.”

* * * * * * *

Feeding people was second nature to Jonesy and it seemed like a good way of taking everyone’s mind off the consequences of pursuing Carlin. – *Imagination could run riot and the best way of curbin’ the imagination was workin’!* – Accordingly, he set both the judge and Andy tasks in clearing up the signs of Carlin’s invasion and preparing a good meal for Slim when he came home victorious.
There came a point, however, when the two old men settled down by the fire with a cup of coffee, hoping to project some semblance of normality into the almost intolerable waiting. Andy looked at them both and stated quietly but firmly: “I’m going outside. I need some air and there’s that harness to finish soaping.” His voice hitched as he recalled the last job Slim had given him.

Jonesy nodded and did not try to dissuade him. – *A boy needed time to think and privacy to master his feelings.* –

He and Judge Wilkins sat in silence for what seemed like a century when Andy had left. They were both too experienced to underestimate the dangers facing Slim and Jess, but that did not prevent their fervent prayers to a just Deity for a small miracle.

Suddenly into that silence came a great yell of triumph.

“They’re back! Slim’s back and Jess is with him!”

- *So who says miracles ain’t happenin’ any more?* –

They both got somewhat stiffly to their feet as Andy burst through the door.

“Jonesy! They’re back! They’re ok! Both of them!” And he was off again out into the yard. Jonesy followed him, feeling his heart unclench for the first time for a long time, but the judge remained behind by the fire, tactfully letting this moment of reunion be solely for those to whom it meant most.

Outside the two young men had dismounted and were nearly knocked off their feet by the enthusiasm of Andy’s welcome.

- *Survivin’ the worst Carlin can do and gettin’ hugged to death when they get home!* – Jonesy grinned to himself. It did not escape his notice that he had included Jess Harper in the word ‘home’. The question was, would Jess stay?

It seemed he would. “All right, deal me in. We’ll stake a hand or two and see how it works out.” Jess’s bright blue eyes met Slim’s light ones and in both there was liking … trust … warmth … the promise of loyalty ... all that Jonesy had hoped for the prosperity of Matt’s dream and, more important, for Slim’s sake.

“Yeah, but don’t deal any off the bottom!” Jonesy was under no illusions that a drifter played by the same rules as a rancher. But he had seen from the first that this stray needed a place to put down roots. He clapped him on the back by way of welcome and Jess took a friendly half-swipe, half-hug at him in return.

“I guess you boys are maybe hungry? There’s a good, hot meal waitin’.” Jonesy cocked an eyebrow at Andy, who just grinned in delight.

“Yeah, come on in. Welcome home!”

This story follows the episode *Stage Stop* very closely and it is acknowledged that much of the detail of dialogue and action is drawn from it.

Yes, there are more stories to come and the next one moves beyond 'Stage Stop' - worthwhile
relationships develop slowly!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!