

The Temptation of Corporal Preston

by

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(based on COTY)

The amount of effort it cost Corporal Preston to breathe as he lay sprawled on his back in the snow was terrible. He'd never imagined it could hurt so much to draw a single breath; it felt like a red-hot poker was jabbing him through his parka. So that was what broken felt like-

No, that was, the blinding flash of something so intense he only recognized it as pain after it had passed. Someone had kicked him square in the ribs; the little bit of space he had left in his brain for independent thought struggled to suppress the whimper rising in his throat. He concentrated on the distant sound of his dog team instead, bedded down for the night back at the camp-

From very close indeed there came a different sound, low and vile. Wallace's laughter. The man he'd meant to arrest for his father's murder. Colder than the snow trying to seep through his parka, that sound. . . He still had a little strength left, and his right side wasn't screaming at him as loudly as his left. Blocking out the other man's voice, he willed his hand to move. His fingers crept towards the-

Towards the place where his service revolver had been. Should have been. Wasn't.

"Nice try, kid." That was Wallace, the words as harsh as the December winds. His voice was hoarse, grating- that was new and he was glad, because it'd been his hands that'd done that to the man's throat, his desperate attempt to hurt him that bought a few more seconds of life. It hadn't brought Wallace down, but it'd been enough to jar him loose. That was something.

Preston forced his eyes open, saw the outlaw's snow-cruled outline looming over him. Clouds blocked most of the light from moon and stars alike, but here and there blue-white aurora shone through. His stolen revolver gleamed in Wallace's hands.

Grimacing, Preston mustered his will again. ". . . won't- get away- with this. . ."

"Yeah? You're fifty miles from anywhere or anyone, and sled dogs make lousy witnesses. Who's going to know?"

Once you started talking it was easier to continue than to stop. "Laj. . . Lajeunesse, my- my sergeant-"

"Him? He's buried under half a ton of snow and ice! When I saw you two had left the Eskimo village, I rigged it myself."

Laughing hurt, but oh, it was worth it. "Saw. . . part of . . . he got away. Wrecked his sled, killed his team. . . not him."

There was silence and wind for a while, and then words with no mirth to them at all. "You Mounties really don't know when to give up, do you?"

Could he sit up? Almost. Almost. He could prop himself up a little, could get his eyes open farther now- oh, it hurt, it hurt like seven kinds of hell, but he could ignore that for a while. "We d-" He sucked a breath between his teeth. "Don't give up. Ever."

Wallace swore. "I don't believe it," he said. "You're still trying- why don't you just lie down and die, damn it?"

Another breath. Another effort. And the words came- growled and clotted with pain, but they came. "Because you're still alive, Wallace."

"Jesus." The revolver lowered for a moment. "You know what, Preston? You're as bad as your father."

There wasn't enough room in his head for words, only for rage. This man- this outlaw, this murderer- he dared say it like it was a curse-

There was a small metallic sound: his own gun, in the hands of an enemy, being readied for the ultimate treachery.

"And now you're going to die just like him," Wallace finished, aiming.

Another man would have flinched, or closed his eyes. But after such a titanic struggle there was nothing left in Corporal Preston that was capable of the easy way out. He stared back at the other man, all terror frozen out of him.

In the moment between taking aim and tightening the trigger finger, no man could've reacted- but the men were not the only beings present. Brown and white fur flashed through the air in a burst of motion. Wallace yelled- the gun fired- the bullet whined past Preston's ear and buried itself in the snow! The sound woke more noises nearby, filling the night with mad yowling and barking cacophony. Preston scarcely believed what he saw: Star, his team's swing dog, snarling with blind fury as she fought to sink her fangs again into Wallace's now-empty hand.

There was no time for gratitude. That would have to come later. Preston forced himself up- forward- there, the gun lay in the snow. Ignoring the lightning pain in his side, he snatched it up with fumbling fingers. Two bullets left. Good. He hadn't the skill left to reload. Star let out a yelp; Preston wheeled, revolver in hand, and saw her drop from Wallace's arm. What the man had done he didn't know, but he wasn't going to let it stand. Before Wallace could make another move Preston lashed out with a spectacular roundhouse kick that sent the other man

sprawling in the snow. A moment later he was on top of the outlaw- half by design, half by motion-spawned agony so intense he all but blacked out. Wallace gasped, struggling to raise his head.

The worst of the pain receded; Preston managed a breath. "Don't even try it," he said through gritted teeth.

"Whuh-"

He'd got one foot firmly planted in the snow. The rest of his weight was on the other knee, though- and that knee rested squarely in the middle of Wallace's chest. Preston leveled his revolver at the point just between the man's eyes.

Wallace went silent.

"If I pulled this trigger right now," Preston said, every word a nightmarish effort, "I'd be justified five times over. You just tried to kill me. If you got out from under me, you'd do it again in a heartbeat. I'd be dead before I could count to nine."

Wallace squirmed. Preston paused, leaning harder on the knee, and the man stilled.

"You tried to murder Sergeant Lajeunesse," Preston continued relentlessly. "You rigged that avalanche with the intent of killing both of us. You killed that Eskimo back in the village. You murdered my father. I wouldn't even have to open my mouth- the court would call it self-defense, and I'd be completely justified before I said a single word."

A tiny, desperate sound escaped Wallace's throat.

There was no change at all in Preston's expression. Without warning, he drew back his hand and smashed the butt of the revolver against Wallace's temple; the outlaw's eyes rolled back in his head, and he sagged in the snow.

Preston quickly peeled off his glove, leaning over to touch fingertips to the man's throat. When he was satisfied that he'd found a pulse, he leaned back and said:

"I don't want to be justified. I want to be right."

Finis

Author's note: I recently discovered that my collection of Challenge of the Yukon MP3s was not only out of order in several places, but incomplete. The episode "The Case That Made Preston A Sergeant", along with several others, was not on any of the three CDs I originally bought. I apologise heartily for this, but in my defense, I really did try to get summaries of all the episodes I hadn't listened to. I simply never found that particular one. Please, accept this story as my humble effort at filling a hole that didn't actually need filling to begin with.

I will now go hide under a fallen tree until the embarrassment passes, and then find some suitable means of expiation for my mistake. I hope you at least enjoyed the story, even if it does conflict with canon.