

Henry Scott bent double over his saddle. His body swayed precariously from side to side. The horse he rode looked no sturdier, a beast so devoid of flesh, it appeared transparent. A few people walked by on the road. Scott didn't notice. They glanced sideways at the horse, blinking once, twice, at what they imagined was the fading light of day seen through the animal's withered body. Stilling their usual "Buenas tardes," a greeting that came easily to their lips, they looked away. Though Scott could barely keep his seat, he appeared formidable, a tall man engulfed by a long horsehide coat, far too warm for a late September day.

Scott rode on toward the pueblo of Los Angeles. To the north, the mountains presided over a wide, green basin, a gift of the rivers that ambled along the land in the dry season and thundered from mountain passes during heavy rains. The path was dry and dusty—the rainy season wasn't upon them yet. He was a stranger, had ridden across the continent to get there. He knew little about the weather or the people. If asked, he would have said, "I know nothing about nothing," a man who gave himself no credit for the things he did know.

Don Rodrigo Tilman, out for a late afternoon ride, rode up next to Scott, intending to engage him in conversation. The owner of the pueblo's oldest store, others depended on his knowing everyone's comings and goings. Could be Mexican, he thought. No, he's bigger, heavier. Scott's eyes were closed, his face nearly hidden by his broad-brimmed hat. The long coat came up around his chin. American, Tilman decided. Straight nose and small mouth. The backs of the man's hands were tanned a deep brown.

Scott, roused from a stupor by Tilman's gaze, kept his eyes fixed on his pommel. His horse kicked up small puffs of dust as it moved forward, tracking a straight line as if it knew where it was going.

"Good afternoon," Tilman said. The stranger's horse stumbled at the sound of the man's voice, throwing its rider off balance. Tilman's horse stepped nimbly to the far side of the trail. Scott righted himself and looked at Tilman. He saw a man well over twice his age and half his size. The older man wore a dark suit like one a judge might wear in St. Louis, the last city that had seen Scott's back. His hat, though, was unfamiliar. Not the tall beaver hat a distinguished St. Louis gentleman would wear. A wide-brimmed, flat-crowned hat, made of leather and

adorned with silver medallions around the crown. Scott couldn't tell whether the man was an American or a Mexican.

"You are going to the pueblo?" Tilman asked.

"Yes." Scott fixed his gaze on the pommel again. His size made his horse appear even more fragile than it was.

"And you are doing..."

Scott couldn't answer this question. His reasons for traveling so far would take more breath than he had to explain. Night would come upon them soon. He was either going to have to bed down off the road or find a place to sleep in town.

He took a deep breath and said very quickly, "Anyroomsintown?"

Tilman showed no surprise at the man's quick rush of words. "Not many, señor. My man is off buying horses from one of the ranches. You can have his bed in the barn for a night or two."

Scott nodded yes.

"I'm going to ride ahead then. In a mile or so, you'll pass the plaza church. I live in a whitewashed house a little farther on. Go round back to the barn. Think you can find it?"

Another nod.

"Good." Tilman prodded his horse lightly with his spurs and turned back toward the pueblo. His horse had barely started off before he turned halfway around to face Scott again.

"I assume you're going to look for work?"

"Yessir," Scott wanted only to get to a place where he could unsaddle his horse and sleep.

"My house is down the street from my store. Come round upstairs to my office in the morning. Early." Each word was precise, each thought conveyed with purpose, all lost on Scott. He was thinking of hay—for his horse to eat, for him to lie on.

Tilman turned toward the pueblo once again and this time rode away.

Scott was too tired to be grateful. So tired he wasn't sure he could ride the short distance to the pueblo. A fragment of the Catholic Mass repeated itself in his head: "*Ave Maria, gratia plena,*" Hail Mary, full of grace. Because he had heard the chant in a church he rarely

entered, he didn't remember any other words, only the sighs of the hundred or so souls who were afraid enough of hell that they woke up early on Sunday morning when they could have used the sleep.

He crossed the Rio Porciúncula, which flowed out of the valley northwest of the pueblo. He passed the Zanja Madre, the Mother Ditch, an aqueduct dug forty years earlier to bring water from the river to the pueblo's small band of settlers. Past grape vines planted by an early French arrival and fields scattered here and there over the landscape.

The pueblo's settlement of humble buildings had looked small from a distance and not much larger as he drew closer. People stopped what they were doing and glanced up at him. Their complexions were darker than his. Mexicans. And darker. Indians. Africans. He had seen all their kind on the trail. In St. Louis, too, where people were more often the pale color of Englishmen. He knew he couldn't converse with any of them. Ignorant of Spanish and only his mother to thank for schooling him in proper English though her native tongue was French. He averted his eyes, wishing he could be as invisible as he felt; his hands clutched the reins more tightly than necessary.

By and by, he came to the pueblo's center. Two men pulled a large cart, empty, through the square. Women converged on the church. Dark shawls covering their heads, they looked like shadows in the dusk. A few children played on the steps. Scott made his way past the plaza at the same dogged pace he had kept for two thousand miles. One-story buildings, most of them the color of earth, flanked the road. Dust swirled around him as a wind rose. Warm. September. Evening. Wind. This is how he'd remember his first evening in the pueblo of Los Angeles.