Incident of the Lonesome Cowboy

by Elfbert

Summary

“An’ that’s it?” Rowdy asked.

“Huh?” Gil frowned.

“I’m ramrod, just like that?”

Gil stuck out his hand. “Can shake on it. But you want an announcement in the paper, you’ll have to sort that yourself.”

Rowdy gave a small smile, and shook the offered hand.

Rowdy needs a job. He finds a home.
Chapter 1

Gil took a gulp from his beer, and made a note in his trail log, then sat back, stretching his legs out and flexing his fingers where they’d been threatening to cramp around the pencil.

A young man walked into the saloon, looked around, then headed for him. Gil stiffened slightly. The kid looked like he was on edge - full of nervous energy.

“Hey Mister, you hirin’ drovers?”

Gil looked him up and down. He was sweating, and it left tracks in the dust on his face. His hair, where it stuck out from under his hat, was wild and bushy, strands of it stuck in the sweat and dust around his temples and the back of his neck. When he was cleaned up Gil bet he was popular with the girls.

“I was,” Gil answered slowly.

“Well I wanna sign up,” the man said, eyes darting around the room, then settling back on Gil. Gil waved a hand over his small notebook. “Too late, kid. Got a full crew.”

There was a flash of anger in the man’s expression. A quick narrowing of the eyes. “What d’you mean, too late? I come over as soon as I heard.”

“Well you heard too late,” Gil rested his right hand on the pistol at his hip. With the other he gestured to the bar where a bunch of his new recruits were drinking beer, chatting and laughing. A few of his regulars were there, too, meeting their new workmates, no doubt trying to take advantage of their good cheer.

“Them?” The man stared, a look of disgust on his face. “Half of ‘em’ll leave you before you get out the valley! You gotta take me on, Mister. I’ll stick with it, I ain’t afraid of workin’, I’ll stick it out.”

Gil spent a moment studying the man. He was skinny - too skinny. Tall with it, probably, Gil guessed, as tall as he was. The dust and dirt on him had gathered in wrinkles where he had been squinting into the sun. His shirt was worn thin, and stitched up in a few places.

“Sorry, like I said, got a full crew.”

Gil lifted his glass, swallowing the remainder of the beer in it and stood.

He had been right, the kid looked him right in the eyes. About six four, then, but so skinny it looked like you could snap him in half. He seemed so angry it seemed like Gil might have to do just that.

He walked past the kid and pushed through the doors, not wanting to get into a fight. Out on the boardwalk he paused a second by the window. The man’s head was bowed, fists clenched. Then he turned abruptly and headed for the door himself. Gil had half expected him to go to the bar and start drowning his sorrows.

Gil walked on, striding down the street, not wanting to be caught looking.
He went to the telegraph office, checking for messages, then dropped into the Cattleman’s Association to check for any news, and finally decided to head down to check on his horse, which he’d left to be re-shod at the farriers.

He walked down the dusty street, spotting the man who’d been to see him earlier. He was standing outside the blacksmith’s shop, doing something to a saddle which sat over the fence of the paddock.

Gil walked on past, finding his horse and checking all four hooves. Satisfied with a job well done he walked up to the blacksmith and paid the man.

“Who’s the man outside?” he gestured to where the young man was visible.

“Some kid. Been ‘round here lookin’ for work.”

“Yeah? You give him some?” Gil squinted out into the fading light.

“Don’t got none. So he asked ‘f he could borrow a punch - cinch broke on his saddle.”

Gil nodded slowly. “Thanks. Keep him a few more hours, will you?” He gestured to his horse.

He walked back outside, and moved to stand behind the young man.

“There’s a place up the street can fix that y’know,” he said.

The man didn’t turn around, but continued trying to shove holes through the two broken ends of the cinch.

“I’m doin’ it,” came the sulky reply.

Gil looked at the strand of rawhide the young man had hanging over the saddle, obviously ready to attempt to tie the cinch back together. He looked at the horse, too. The animal was standing patiently, and Gil let his gaze wander over it - well kept, groomed, shod and healthy. More than he could say for it’s owner.

He sighed. “Buy you a beer, kid?” he offered.

“I don’t need no hand-outs, Mister,” the man swore as the punch ripped through the edge of the leather.

“Well I’m goin’ up to Millie’s. I’ll be buyin’ two beers and a coupla plates of dinner. You don’t wanna eat the second one, I’ll find someone who does.” Gil walked off, resisting the urge to look back.

As he passed the saloon he saw Pete and did a slight detour.

“Pete, there a tall kid, down the street? Maybe workin’ on a saddle?”

Pete’s eyes flicked to look, then he turned back to face the saloon and nodded. “Yeah, ‘cept he ain’t workin’, he’s jus’ starin’ at you. Why? Trouble?”

“Oh, no,” Gil answered. “But if he comes after me, follows me in to Millie’s, can you get that saddle - it’s got a broke cinch. Take it to Old Man Palmer, tell him to fix it, quick as he can. Pay him - I’ll give it you back. Get it back where it was ‘fore we come back out.”
Pete nodded, frowning. “Sure can. Why?”

Gil gave him a smile. “Jus’ get it done. Tell you later.”

“Sure thing, Boss.” Pete glanced down the street again - just a quick movement of his eyes, whilst keeping his head perfectly still. “He’s just threw somethin’ down. Headin’ for the trough. Havin’ a wash.”

Gil nodded and continued on his way, walking into the small dining room and taking a seat in the corner, facing the room.

He ordered two beers and two meals. Then sat back.

The young man walked in as Gil took the first sip of his beer. He looked around, still scowling, and spotted Gil, walking up to the table and pausing.

Gil gestured to the chair.

The young man sat, pulling his hat off and hanging it from the arm.

“Got a name?” Gil asked.

He got a glare. Then the man’s hand slid across the table, long fingers touching the wet side of the other beer glass, where a little foam had slipped down. It looked like he was at war with himself over what to do. Finally he picked up the glass, and drank deeply.

“Yates. Rowdy Yates,” he said, after swallowing and licking his lips.

Gil tilted his glass toward Rowdy. “Pleased to meet you. Gil Favor.”

“I know who you are,” Rowdy answered, but the beer had obviously cooled his temper a little, and the anger had gone, replaced by a sort of determination.

Two plates of dinner arrived, and Rowdy had the fork in his hand and was eating almost before the china had hit the table.

Gil watched for a moment, then started on his own meal.

“Why’d you think those men I took on’ll quit,” Gil asked, when Rowdy showed no signs of slowing down the pace of his eating.

Rowdy barely glanced up, and spoke around a mouthful of chicken and mashed potato. “I know jaspers like ‘em.”

Gil waited, but Rowdy offered no further explanation.

“But you reckon you’d stick for a whole drive?” Gil asked, sitting back slightly, sipping his beer, looking between his almost full plate and Rowdy’s nearly empty one.

“Know I would,” Rowdy answered.

As Rowdy wiped the last of the gravy from his plate with a slightly dirty finger, Gil gestured to the girl who’d brought the plates.
“Friend here’s a little hungry,” he smiled to her. “Can you get him another plate?”

Rowdy had gone back to frowning. “I told you, I don’t need no charity,” he said.

“Look like you ain’t ate for a week,” Gil answered, stabbing a piece of chicken himself.

Rowdy didn’t answer, but when the new plate arrived he ate it, although at a slower pace. “What’s it to you?” He asked.

Gil shrugged. “Maybe I been where you are, tryin’ for work, goin’ hungry.”

“Have you,” Rowdy said, not sounding interested in the slightest.

“Done many trail drives?” Gil asked, changing tack.

“Enough,” Rowdy answered. “But it don’t matter t’you, said you had a full crew.”

Gil shrugged. “You’re tellin’ me I got a crew of quitters.”

“You’ll find out, soon enough, then you’ll wish you took me on.”

He couldn’t help but smile at Rowdy’s attitude, but did his best to hide it by taking another gulp of beer.

Once they’d both finished eating Rowdy swallowed the last of his beer, then dug in the pocket of his vest. He pulled out a few nickels and dimes, poking through them.

“Told you, kid, it’s on me,” Gil said. “Put your money away.”

Rowdy stared at him for a second, and Gil could see the warring emotions behind his expression.

“Fine, you wanna waste your money to make yourself feel better about not takin’ me on, it’s fine with me. So thanks, Mister, but I got things to be doin’.” Rowdy stood, shoving his hat back on and turning to leave.

Gil watched him go, paid Millie, who was chatting to other patrons by the counter, and headed back into the street.

He stood on the boardwalk, looking up at the sky which was rapidly turning a deep navy blue, and shook his head. Then turned toward the blacksmith’s and watched the Rowdy’s lanky silhouette heading down the street.

He could see the exact moment Rowdy realised what had happened - the first movement, a quick check, when he realised his saddle had been moved, then a realisation, and finally he turned. He headed back toward Gil, and Gil smiled at the anger in every line of his body.

“You do that?” Rowdy gestured, eyes alight with anger.

Gil shrugged, but couldn’t stop smiling at the fury pouring off Rowdy.

“I told you, I don’t need nothin’ from you. Comin’ an’ showin’ off your money don’t impress me, not your fancy meals, an’ beer, an’ not messin’ with my stuff,” Rowdy stabbed a finger down the street.

He was nearly shouting, and Gil was fairly sure he was only just managing not to throw a punch.
Gil pulled two cheroots from his pocket, and held one out to Rowdy, who ignored it, glaring at him.

He shrugged, put one back and lit the other.

“Well? Ain’t you gonna say somethin’?” Rowdy asked.

“Figured you weren’t gonna be no good on a trail drive with no saddle,” Gil said, letting the smoke drift from his mouth. “And I ain’t givin’ you nothin’. ’S comin’ outta your wages.”

Rowdy stared. His eyes narrowed. “You said you didn’t need no drovers.”

“’S right. I don’t. Needed a ramrod, though. An’ you seemed like you’d make a good one.”

The anger seemed to melt away from Rowdy, to be replaced by confusion. “A…ramrod?”

Gil shrugged. “It’s what I need. Take it or leave it. Dollar fifty a day, an’ three meals.”

“I’ll take it. I just…” He didn’t finish the sentence.

Gil blew smoke upwards, temporarily obscuring the stars. “You’re right, some of those men I took on won’t make it.”

“Why d’you take ‘em on then?” Rowdy asked.

“’Cause sometimes a man’ll surprise you. Sometimes he’ll surprise himself. I take on a few more’n I need, don’t get paid to the end of the drive, so can afford to lose a few, ‘long the way.”

Rowdy nodded slowly. It seemed the fight had gone out of him.

“Anyway, you comin’ to camp? Or you got rooms in town, folk you need to say ‘good bye’ to?”

Rowdy looked around. “No. No one. I ain’t got nothin’ in this town.”

Gil nodded. “Then come an’ bed down, meet the others, if they ain’t in the bottom of a bottle someplace. Move out day after tomorrow - got a full day of brandin’ to do tomorrow.”

“An’ that’s it?” Rowdy asked.

“Huh?” Gil frowned.

“I’m ramrod, just like that?”

Gil stuck out his hand. “Can shake on it. But you want an announcement in the paper, you’ll have to sort that yourself.”

Rowdy gave a small smile, and shook the offered hand.

They fetched their horses and headed for the camp. Gil dropped slightly behind Rowdy, watching how he rode, checking the temperament of his horse. He smiled to himself. The kid was obviously used to being in the saddle, and the horse seemed decent enough - quick on it’s feet, not too spirited.

“Who’ve you drovered for, then?” Gil asked, settling his horse into a walk next to Rowdy.
“Mister Dennison, Mister Grayson. Worked as a cattle hand, too, on a few spreads. I know cattle, Mister, if that’s what you’re worried ‘bout.”

“I ain’t worried,” Gil answered. “You’d get found out quick enough if you didn’t.” He glanced around in the darkness, happy to let his horse pick the way over the land. “Knew Dennison when he were just a drover. Did hear he had his own herd. What’s he like as a Boss?”

Rowdy’s snort of derision told him everything he needed to know. “I only done one drive with him. Reckon he thought he was above us all.”

Gil smiled. “Reckon he used to think he was above the Good Lord Hisself.”

There was another small laugh from Rowdy. “He ain’t changed then.”
They arrived at the camp to find a few of the men playing cards or chatting, drinking coffee. Gil glanced around, cataloguing who was there and which faces were missing. He knew Pete was still in town though, and trusted him to round up the strays, get them on their horses one way or another, and get them back to camp. He knew a few of the local men he’d picked up would spend one last night in town, too, and had told them all to be by the herd just after sun-up, to start the long day of branding.

“Wish,” he called over, waiting for Wishbone to wipe his hands down on his apron and turn to face him. “Wishbone, camp cook, doctor, an’ anything else he’s pressed to. Rowdy Yates, new ramrod.”

Wishbone stuck out his hand. “Pleased t’meet you, Rowdy. Now, you two had supper? ‘Cause I kept some back for any of you still in town.”

“Yeah, we…” Gil began.

“Well, if you’re offerin’,” Rowdy smiled.

Gil felt his eyes widen a little. Not that it would be the first time a man had been more interested in the vittles than the wage.

“Hey Wish,” he said, once a plate of warm stew and a biscuit had been provided to Rowdy. “Tomorrow mornin’, want a decent breakfast, and a lot of coffee. Got a lot of beeves t’get through.”

Wishbone nodded. “Of course. I know my business.”

“An’ we’ll be movin’ out first light next day, so anything you need, you ride into town tomorrow. Check with the new men, that they got beddin’ and slickers. Can always use a few spares. Word is we’ll hit rain ‘fore the week’s out.”

“I’ll check.” Wishbone’s gaze slid to where Rowdy was shovelling stew down. “Ain’t he awful young to be ramrod?”

Gil glanced over and smiled. “He’s young, but he got spirit. More’n can be said for a lot of ‘em.”

Wishbone looked unsure. “Spirited colt can go either way. Could settle, might throw you.”

“We’ll find out,” Gil said, unconcerned.

That night Gil stretched out a little way from the fire, head on his saddle, trying to sleep, rather than go over the million thoughts in his head of all the things he had to do and check before setting off.

A noise near him made him crack an eye open.

Rowdy was standing, looking a little lost, blanket dangling from one hand, saddle from the other.

“Go t’sleep,” Gil said softly, pointing at the dirt. “Gonna be busy come t’morrow.”
Rowdy gave a small smile, dropped his own saddle a few feet from Gil’s and settled on his blanket.

The next morning Wishbone woke everyone early by clanging a couple of pots together, and Gil stretched as he stood, then buckled his gun belt on.

It didn’t surprise him in the least to see Rowdy getting his hand slapped away by a wooden spoon as he investigated what was cooking for breakfast.

“Hey, Wish, he’s a growin’ boy, ’sides, thought you’d ‘ppreciate someone so eager to taste your cookin’,” he called

Wishbone frowned, but seemed to soften slightly. “Be ready in a minute. There’s plenty.”

Rowdy smiled at him. “Sure is nice havin’ someone t’do the cookin’.”

Wishbone almost smiled, before frowning again and nodding. “Sure is when they’re as good as me.”

Gil smiled to himself, and rubbed a hand over his face. He decided he didn’t need a shave, instead opting to tip a bit of water from his canteen into his palm and rub it over his face and neck.

Most people were up and about, rolling up their bedding, yawning and stretching.

“Got a lot t’do today,” Gil called out. “Sooner you get it done, sooner we can all rest up. Movin’ out tomorrow, first light, so you don’t push on an’ get it done we’ll be workin’ through the night.”

There was a general murmur of agreement, and Gil turned, hefting his saddle.

As he did up his cinch a voice behind him made him turn.

“You…er…you ain’t stoppin’ for breakfast?”

He turned to see Rowdy looking confused.

“I’m gonna start up the fires, set out the brands. Get it all ready. That way the men can get right on it, I’ll eat when I’m done.”

Rowdy looked from breakfast, sizzling over the fire, to Gil’s horse. “Guess…Guess I’ll help you, then, Boss?”

Gil smiled. “Sure you can.”

They set the fires at intervals, and rode out to check with the nightwatch.

When they got back to the camp they both accepted a plate of eggs, bacon and biscuits. Gil sat on a crate, and Rowdy joined him.

“Make sure the men are all workin’. Cuttin’ the cattle, keepin’ ‘em movin’. I want this done slick, no waitin’ ‘round, no one stood idle.”

Rowdy nodded. “Sure.”
“Keep movin’, keep ridin’ the line, anyone you see flaggin’, help ‘em. When some stop to eat, move others around, keep the fires hot while they’re away.”

“Sure thing, Boss.”

“Now, go see if Wish needs any more eggs eatin’, then get to it.”

Gil spent as much time watching Rowdy as he did watching the men who were working on the branding. He was glad to see Rowdy doing as he said - moving between the fires, ensuring there were always cattle roped ready to avoid any delays. He didn’t hesitate to get stuck in, to give orders, and Gil was glad that the fire he’d seen the day before hadn’t gone out just because he’d got the job.

He headed back to where Wishbone was preparing lunch, and took the mug of coffee offered up to him.

“New ramrod seems okay,” Wishbone nodded toward where Rowdy was rounding up a few straying beeves. “Still mighty green though.”

“He do,” Gil agreed. “An’ he is. Doin’ a fine job so far though.”

“Where’d you find him?”

Gil smiled. “He found me. Seemed…seemed like he was ‘bout the only one who did who really wanted a job, ‘f you know what I mean.”

“I know,” Wishbone nodded. “Still, awful young.”

“Young, keen, an’ somethin’ to prove,” Gil smiled. “He got a drive in him. And he ain’t ‘fraid to tell me if he thinks I’m wrong.”

Wishbone sighed. “Jus’ don’t go firin’ him when he’s right, an’ you are wrong.”

Gil grinned at Wishbone, threw the dregs of his coffee down and lobbed the tin cup at the chuck wagon, not caring when it skittered across the back and fell to the floor.

“Sendin’ the men in a few at a time, Wish, so’s we can keep brandin’. Don’t have ‘em linger.”

They worked late to process just over three thousand cattle, each of them receiving Gil’s road brand. But they were finished before nightfall, and Wishbone had cooked up a special meal, and a treat of some sort of cake with lumps of peach in it, taking advantage of one of the last times he’d have the full day to cook for a while.

The mood in the camp was good, the men singing along to a mouth organ, some playing cards or chatting.

Rowdy stood next to Gil, who was working on something on the back of the chuck wagon.

“So?” He finally said, when it was obvious Gil wasn’t going to look up from whatever he was writing.

“Huh?” Gil looked up at him, glanced around the camp, then went back to writing.
“So, we done well, right? Got ‘em all branded,” Rowdy smiled.

Gil paused again, looking up. “What’d you expect?”

“Well…” Rowdy rubbed his hand over his stomach. “I’m jus’ sayin’, we got it all done, in decent
time, too.”

“‘S what I pay you for;” Gil answered.

Rowdy half nodded, half shrugged, and headed back to the fire.

He sat heavily on a crate, and Wishbone spooned him out a full plate of chicken stew.

“He err, he don’t give out praise too easy, does he,” Rowdy pointed his spoon at Gil.

Wishbone glanced over. “He’s the Boss, he don’t have to.”

Rowdy shrugged. “No, but…”

“Anyhow, this way you know when you get it he sure do mean it.”

Rowdy nodded slowly. “Guess so.”

The next few days were hard work - the beeves didn’t want to go, the weather turned wet, and Gil
drove everyone hard, shaking down both cattle and men.

As Rowdy had guessed, and Gil had known, a few men gave up and turned back, unable to cope
with the long hours and hard work, especially with the relentless rain.

Rowdy hit his blankets each night with a full stomach, heavy eyelids and a sense of satisfaction. He
got shouted at sometimes, but probably less than most of the other new hands. And the men
seemed to like him well enough. He’d been worried that the older hands wouldn’t like taking his
orders, but, he reflected, they took Gil Favor’s, and he was also younger than many of them.

With the rain falling and Pete already out scouting ahead Gil rode up to Rowdy, who was just
neatening up one side of the point, shouting at swing to keep an eye on the cattle bunching up.

“Need to go on ahead, check the river. Come on.”

Rowdy gave a small smile as Gil pulled his horse around and took off, and followed quickly.

“You worried about the crossing?” He asked as they rode.

Gil grunted and half shrugged. “Reckon weather’s been bad upstream too. Might be okay. Might
not. Could be even Pete can’t get ’cross. Only way to find out is check.”

Their horses were blowing by the time they got to the river, and they let them walk down to the
river’s edge and drink. Gil climbed from his saddle, crouching down in the mud and scooped water
up in his hands, drinking it and wiping his face.

“So?” Rowdy asked.
Gil spent a moment watching the flow, then climbed into the saddle again. “Could cross it now. Jus’ hope it don’t rise much more.”

They turned and headed back - the sky was clearing, and a weak sunlight made the raindrops glisten in the sun.

Rowdy realised that Gil’s attention wasn’t on their path, and looked around, trying to follow his gaze.

Then he spotted it - birds circling, low. Almost invisible against the rising face of the bluff.

“What is it?” He asked.

“Don’t rightly know,” Gil answered slowly. “Need t’find out though.”

Rowdy frowned. “Why?”

Gil glanced at him. “Obviously summat dead, or dyin’, way them buzzards is goin’ ‘round. Need to see if it’s a poison waterhole, or a kill by a mountain lion, somethin’ that we don’t want the herd to walk into.”

“Oh, yeah, I guess,” Rowdy nodded. He’d usually regarding such signs of death and something he didn’t want to be involved in.

They turned up the slight incline that led to the bottom of the cliff-face, picking their way through the trees, looking for any signs of what the birds were watching.

Rowdy heard Gil give a small sigh. He glanced over, then followed the direction of his gaze.

There was a body, crumpled on the floor.

Gil swung himself out of his saddle and looped his reins around a nearby tree branch, then walked toward the body.

Rowdy followed, looking around, just in case.

“Ugh,” he turned away from the body, gritting his teeth. The smell alone was enough to turn his stomach, hanging thick in the damp air, sticking in his throat.

The face was disfigured, eyes plucked out by the birds already. What was left of the man had also been picked at by predators, the belly ripped open, blood and guts trailing out.

Rowdy tried not to look, but was aware of Gil going closer.

“Hey, you don’t…I mean, he’s sure dead,” Rowdy protested.

Gil didn’t answer, kneeling down on the wet dirt, hiding the worst from Rowdy’s view. Rowdy watched as he searched the body, clouds of flies rising away from his movement, then settling again as soon as they could.

He retched slightly, acid burning in the back of his throat, and clamped his hand over his mouth.

“How can you…” He said, once he felt like he could open his mouth with puking, then shook his head as Gil pulled a watch on a chain from the mess of innards and ripped clothing.
“Ain’t no diff’ rent from any other animal, in the end,” Gil answered quietly. He slid his fingers into pockets, eventually finding a small coin pouch, along with some tobacco and matches.

When he stood again Rowdy could see blood on his hands. He couldn’t quite drag his eyes away. It made him wonder if there was anything Gil Favor couldn’t just deal with, if there was anything that spooked him, or put him on edge.

“Never seen a body before?” Gil asked.

“I seen plenty,” Rowdy replied, defensively. “I was in the war.” He didn’t add that most of the ones he’d seen were people who just plain didn’t wake up in the morning, dead from the malnutrition or disease of the prison he’d been in.

Gil just gave a nod. “Wish we had a shovel.”

“We can come back,” Rowdy answered.

Gil looked up to the circling birds. “Yeah.”

Rowdy pulled his canteen from the horn of his saddle. “Here,” he offered. “Wash up.”

Gil held his hands out, still holding the watch, and Rowdy tipped the water.

“Town’s only a few miles off. We’ll take this in to the sheriff. Someone might recognise it,” Gil turned the watch over, looking for any engravings or marks. Then he looked up the sandy, rocky cliff face. “Sure like to know how he got down here.”

“Might be a way up there,” Rowdy looked around.

“Might be,” Gil agreed. He shoved the watch in his own pocket, and headed back to his horse.

Rowdy looked back at the body for a moment, before giving a shudder and following.

They kept on along the valley floor, retracing their steps until they reached the herd.

Gil rode up to Wishbone, and reined in next to the wagon.

“Go on ahead, wherever you find a good spot, stop ’n get noon camp set,” he said.

“Sure thing, Boss,” Wishbone nodded and snapped the reins, urging his team on.

Then Gil headed to Joe Scarlet. “Joe, there’s a body up ahead, under the cliff on the left, ‘bout mile an’ a half. You should see it, there’s buzzard’s over him. Take a spade an’ someone else an’ get him underground.”

Joe nodded. “Sure thing, Boss.”

“Hey, an’ Joe,” Gil glanced around at the other drovers. “He ain’t a pretty sight. Don’t take one of the kids. Mebbe Rich or Parsons. Someone who can stomach it.”

Joe looked grim, but nodded. “Leave it to me,” he answered.

Gil rode on to Quince and gestured up the trail. “River’s up, but we can still make it across, unless Pete gets back an’ says different,” he called. “Wish is doin’ noon camp, after that, you push ‘em on, fast as you like. Me an’ Rowdy’s got business in town, we should get back to you ‘fore you get wet though, okay?”
Quince touched his hat in acknowledgement. “You got it, Mister Favor,” he answered.

“Rowdy!” Gil called, looking around for his ramrod.

Rowdy appeared from the other side of the herd, cutting through the beeves. “Boss?”

“Come on, we can get in to town, try for the mail an’ see ‘bout this fella an’ be back ‘fore we cross the water,” he called out.

Rowdy looked toward the chuck wagon, then back to Gil. “But…ain’t we havin’ lunch?” He asked.

Gil rolled his eyes. “Thought I employed a ramrod, ‘stead I got a stomach on horseback.”

“I just meant…”

“Give you my word, as boss of this outfit, that I won’t let you starve ‘tween here an’ town, deal?” He said sweetly.

Rowdy looked unsure, but nodded and followed him as he rode away.
Chapter 3

The town was small, and what had obviously been dusty streets were thick with mud. People made their way along the boardwalks, women holding their skirts gathered up in an attempt to keep them from the dirt.

Gil spotted the jail and kicked his horse on. Once outside he looked down, with a slight grimace, then dismounted, boots sinking ankle deep into the cloying mud.

“May as well stay here,” he said to Rowdy. “Or find someplace to eat.”

He looped his reins around the hitching rail and took a step onto the boardwalk, the mud pulling him back.

The door opened and an older man stepped out, star shining on his chest. “Don’t go bringin’ that mess into my office,” he warned, looking down at Gil’s feet. “What can I do for you, Son?”

“I’m drivin’ a herd, ‘bout three miles East of here. Me an’ my ramrod was out scoutin’, found a body. Weren’t a whole lot left of him. Maybe…’tween your age an’ mine, dark shirt, dark pants, had this on him,” Gil held up the pocket watch and coin pouch. “Had my men bury him, but thought maybe you’d know, if someone were missin’.”

The sheriff took the watch and looked at it. “Where’d you say you found him?”

“Oh,” Gil gestured. “I guess…four, five miles out, bottom of a bluff. ‘Bout two mile from the river, maybe?”

“Shot?” The sheriff asked, tucking the watch into his pocket.

Gil gave a small shrug. “Di’n’t see no sign, but…like I say, there weren’t that much left of him. Dead maybe…three, four days? Was right at the bottom of the cliff, though, could’ve fell over, maybe?”

The sheriff nodded. “Obliged to you for bringin’ this to me,” he patted his pocket. “I’ll send word around, see if anyone’s missin’.”

Gil touched his hat, then stepped back into the mud.

They stopped at the telegraph office, but were told their post would probably have gone on to the next town, then headed to one of the small canteens.

Rowdy ate a steak with potatoes, once again managing to clear his plate before Gil was halfway through eating.

But, thought Gil, Rowdy had changed, even in the few weeks they’d been on the trail. He was still skinny, but he looked healthier, stronger. He watched as the younger man looked around, eyes always moving.

As they rode back to the herd Gil gestured to the left.

“Push ‘em on,” he called. “I’m jus’ going for a look.”

Rowdy didn’t have the chance to protest as Gil headed off, leaving Rowdy to make his way back to the herd alone.
They were almost at the river, and Rowdy had ridden around, checking that everyone was ready to cross. He moved to the side of the valley himself, dismounting and pulling off his chaps, in the hope they might remain dry, then delivering them to the supply wagon.

Other drovers had shed whatever clothing they could, in preparation.

He spotted Gil riding in, and gave a small smile. He knew he could have got the herd across the river - but he’d rather that Gil did it.

He was fairly sure the men would follow his orders, he just wasn’t certain they’d be the right ones. He hadn’t done that many river crossings, let alone when the water was as high as this.

“Everythin’ set?” Gil asked, as he rode past.

“Sure thing, Boss,” Rowdy nodded.

“Pete back?”

Rowdy shook his head.

He watched as Gil ordered Quince to rope the lead steer, and then they were committed. Gil rode back and forth, shouting orders, slowing the herd up or calling for the men to bring the beeves on. Pushing them away from the far bank once they were on dry land to make room for the following cattle.

The far bank was churning up quickly, the beeves slipping and struggling. Rowdy plunged into the cold water and helped Gil and Scarlet drive them on, occasionally roping one which floundered, dragging it onto dry land only to get straight back in the water.

“Push ‘em!” Gil yelled, above the noise of the cattle and water. “Keep ’em tight that side!”

Rowdy tried to watch, to remember, but he couldn’t keep up with the situation, and ended up just following orders, doing what he thought was right, and missing half of what Gil did.

Finally they were across, the thick mud stretching away from the river, following the path of the cattle. The horses slipped and slithered, but no one went down.

“Ride up, find a place to bed ‘em down,” Gil ordered Rowdy.

Rowdy spurred his horse on, passing the leading steers and continuing on. There was grass, and he knew that however miserable the rain was to work in, they needed it. The lush countryside would be kinder to them than parched dry earth. He spotted an area with some trees and headed for it, testing the ground, ensuring it wasn’t boggy. It passed inspection, and he was just turning to return to the herd when he was hailed.

“Hey, Rowdy!”

He turned and saw Pete heading for him. He smiled. “Hi Pete. Good to see you. Was just finding bed ground,” he gestured.

Pete glanced around and nodded. “Yeah, seems fine. How far back’s the herd?”

“Oh, just a bit. We got over the river, point’s only…mebbe half mile? Not even.”
“I’ll come with you then,” Pete smiled.

“How’s it look up ahead?” Rowdy asked.

“Fine, yeah. Seems like we might get some easy goin’ for once,” Pete nodded.

Rowdy had immediately taken to Pete Nolan - it was obvious that Gil trusted the scout completely, and Pete was easy-going, didn’t seem to have quarrel with anyone. He could also sing, which was a welcome thing in the evenings. The only thing Rowdy was a little jealous of was how comfortable Pete seemed to be in his own skin. Nothing seemed to bother him, he shrugged off the ribbing others gave him and threw insults as freely as he received them, usually with a smile.

Once they were back with the herd Rowdy told Gil about the spot he’d chosen before taking point to lead them in, leaving Pete and Gil to talk.

Once camp had been set up he watched as Gil and Pete studied the trail maps, sitting shoulder to shoulder. He wished he could join in, but neither men looked up, both deep in conversation, fingers tracing routes.

Finally dinner was ready, and Rowdy pushed his way to the front of the queue, gratefully receiving a plate of stew and a biscuit. He turned to sit near Gil, only to see the Boss heaving his saddle back onto his horse.

He sighed, and took a seat near the fire instead. His pants and boots were still wet from the river crossing, and he would rather they dried before he slept.

Eventually Gil returned, and Wishbone doled him out a plate of stew, and poured a mug of coffee. He sat next to Rowdy, coffee balanced on his knee, and ate in silence.

“Pete said it looks good ahead,” Rowdy broke the silence.

“Mmm,” Gil nodded, chewing.

“Good grazin’?” Rowdy asked.

“So Pete says,” Gil answered.

“Did you…er…find anything? When you went off, on the way back?” Rowdy asked.

Gil didn’t answer, and looked around the camp. He finished the last of his dinner, sopping up the sauce from the stew with his biscuit, them swallowed his coffee down.

“Who’s on night watch?” He asked Rowdy.

“Joe and Quince, then me an’ Roberts,” Rowdy answered.

Gil nodded.

Rowdy watched him walk away, wishing there was a way to just make Gil Favor talk. He just wasn’t quite sure what to make of his new boss. Rowdy thought himself a good judge of character, but with Gil he wasn’t sure.
He woke when Gil shook him. They usually slept close together, somehow it just seemed right to Rowdy - they were the two senior members of the drive, they should stick together.

“Get out an’ relieve Joe an’ Jim,” Gil said, having barely moved from his bedroll, just rolled far enough to give Rowdy a shove.

Rowdy scrubbed his hands over his face, sighed, and got up, vaguely kicking his bedroll into a heap as he hefted his saddle onto his back. He gave Roberts a kick in the leg to rouse him.

He dropped all his gear by his horse, then slung his gun belt around his hips, settled his saddle blanket over his horse’s back and swung his saddle up.

He yawned as he rode out to the herd, spotted Joe and headed for him, humming a tune so as not to alarm the man.

“Me an’ Roberts is here,” he said, yawning again. “Go find Quince.”

“Sure thing,” Joe smiled. “Been quiet so far. Hope it stays that way.”

Rowdy nodded, and let his horse walk on, wanting to do a lap of the herd to check everything was okay, and to get moving, so he didn’t fall asleep in his saddle.

Joe went off in the other direction, and Rowdy hear the murmur of his voice as he spoke to Quince somewhere in the gloom.

The night was dark, a few clouds obscuring the moon which should have lit his way, but Rowdy trusted his horse to pick a good path. He sang and hummed as he moved, so as not to spook the cattle or Roberts, once he found the other man.

As Joe had said, the cattle were quiet, mostly laying down, making almost no noise, and Rowdy allowed himself to relax a little.

He found Roberts on the other side of the herd, and they chatted for a few minutes about the weather, and how they’d both rather be asleep, before Rowdy moved on, back to his position.

He let his horse walk up and down, reaching to pat it’s neck. “Don’t know how come you’re so awake,” he grumbled.

A noise behind him made him turn. He peered into the darkness, then gently urged the horse on, glad the recent wet weather made their movements near silent over the grass.

There were a few trees and rocks between the herd and the camp, and he squinted into the darker shadows, trying to see if something or someone was sneaking up on either beeves or drovers.

Then he realised there was a distinct shape against one of the lighter rocks.

The moon chose that moment to come out from behind the clouds and he could clearly see it was Quince and Joe, he could also see what they were doing.

He turned his horse away, eyes wide, and shook his head. There was no way…

Rowdy didn’t know what to do. He glanced back, then away again, afraid he’d be spotted looking, and also completely confused by what he was seeing.
In the end he headed back to camp. He walked around the edge, loosely hitching his horse to one of the wagons. He crept over to Gil and shook his shoulder.

“Wassup?” Gil asked, blinking awake, fingers already closed around his gun. “Trouble?”

Rowdy frowned. “No…I mean…” he glanced over to the two bedrolls which were empty, side by side.

“What’s up?” Gil sat up, glancing around.

“I just…I was out, and…It’s Joe an’ Jim. They was…”

“C’me on, spit it out,” Gil hissed. “Rustlers?”

“No. They was…in amongst the rocks. An’…” Rowdy shook his head.

“What’s up?” Gil sat up, glancing around.

“I just…I was out, and…It’s Joe an’ Jim. They was…”

“C’me on, spit it out,” Gil hissed. “Rustlers?”

“No. They was…in amongst the rocks. An’…” Rowdy shook his head.

“Who was? Who’s watchin’ the herd?” Gil asked. “Quince an’ Joe meant to be on nightwatch?”

“I…no, I went out, me an’ Roberts is on nightwatch, Joe an’ Quince was in the rocks…” Rowdy frowned.

“Then why in the ever lovin’ ain’t you out there instead of bein’ here, wakin’ me up?” Gil growled.

“Cause I come to tell you! Jim an’ Joe were out there…kissing, like they was sweet on each other an’…it ain’t right,” Rowdy finished, unsure of how to say exactly what he’d seen.

“If they ain’t meant to be watchin’ the beeves then I don’t care if they’re dancin’ in a can-can line! You get back out there an’ look at them cattle ‘stead of lookin’ at the drovers, right?” Gil jabbed his finger vaguely toward the herd.

Rowdy made his way back out to the cattle, frowning, and definitely not looking into any dark shadows. Occasionally he glanced back to the camp.

It must have been at least half an hour later when he heard the sound of low and slightly tuneless humming as someone approached him.

The clouds were clearing now, and the moonlight meant he could pick out Gil - the wide chaps, biggest horse in the remuda and relaxed pose in the saddle cutting a distinctive figure.

“Sent Roberts in,” Gil said, as he came to a stop by Rowdy. “No point everyone losin’ sleep.”

Rowdy didn’t answer, just stared at the cows.

“Look, I didn’t mean…out here, man’s business is his own, right? Long as these men push those beeves, I ain’t got a complaint against any of ‘em.”

“But…” Rowdy started.

Gil held up his hand. “Quince an’ Joe, they’re partners, you hire one of ‘em, you get both. Plenty of others out here the same. Can be a lonely place, ’s good to have a friend you know’s got your back. Someone’ll get you outta trouble, or…leastways, get into trouble with you.”

Rowdy nodded, slowly. “So you don’t mind…I mean…it ain’t natural, right?”

Gil shrugged. “Out here, don’t see a girl for months at a stretch, sometimes. Can’t blame a man for finding another way. They…they ain’t going to bother no one else. Think of ‘em as…married.
They been a pair long as I’ve known ‘em. Ain’t never given no bother to anyone. Jim’s the best cow man we got. Joe’s the one drags him out the bottle and into the saddle.”

“I guess,” Rowdy said, uncertainly.

“So let ‘em be. Long as they ain’t shirkin’ the work, jus’ let ‘em be. Both good men, good drovers. Two of the best. Right?”

Rowdy nodded. “Right.”

Gil headed off, slowly disappearing into the darkness, just his deep baritone voice singing what sounded suspiciously like a lullaby to the cows.

Rowdy was left with his own thoughts. He’d heard rumour that there were some men who just didn’t like girls. Mainly lurid stories hailing from mining camps or other places where women were few and far between, often told with a view to terrify the young kids who’d just joined a group - be it cowpunching, the army or in the prison. He’d always found men accused of such things were shunned, treated with suspicion, and told never to find himself alone with them. He’d been told he was good looking enough times to take the warnings, even though he hadn’t a clue what might happen to him. He was sure that if anything did, Gil would trust those two before trusting a new man, though, and it made him uncomfortable.

He’d never heard anyone speak of it like Gil had - as if it was fine, just one of those things. Almost sounded like he thought it was normal, like picking up a girl when you went through town. He wondered if it could possibly be. He supposed there were some men who weren’t bad looking. Like Gil. Although Rowdy wasn’t sure if he was that handsome. It was more that he just made you feel like you could trust him.

Every now and again, through out the night, he and Gil would fetch up together again, as the roamed around the edge of the herd. He didn’t mention anything else about it, and Gil let the subject drop. Rowdy found he didn’t have much to say. He felt confused, and a little embarrassed.

“Be a nice day today,” Gil said on one such meeting, looking up to where the sky had cleared and the stars were shining clear, gently twinkling in the heavens.

Rowdy looked up. He’d always liked sleeping outdoors, under the wide open skies.

“Know how to find your way, goin’ by the stars?” Gil asked, looking across at him.

Rowdy shook his head. “I know you can…but I ain’t ever been shown how,” he admitted.

“See the one there - called the big dipper. Looks like a dippin’ cup?”

Rowdy looked up at the thousands of stars. He couldn’t make out any shapes that looked like anything.

“Here,” Gil swung down off his horse, gesturing for Rowdy to do the same.

He stood behind Rowdy, one hand on his shoulder, right arm outstretched, pointing. “See, there’s the handle, them four,” he traced the line, cheek almost touching Rowdy’s ear as he tried to make sure Rowdy could see where he was pointing. “Then the cup. Got it?”
Rowdy nodded. “Yeah, I got it.”

“Now you follow them two, at the end of the cup, see how they point direct to that bright star? That’s the North Star. What we’re heading toward. Always stays in the north, that one does. An’ the dipper goes around it, so even if the dipper seems the other way up, you can still follow them two at the end, an’ know that bright one’s north.”

“It don’t move?” Rowdy asked.

Gil shook his head. “Leastways, not enough that you don’t know you’re going north if you’re headin’ for it. Now, in a bit, you’ll see three star comin’ up in a line. That’s east. I’ll show you when they come up. Always up in the east, down in the west, but they’re easier to see in winter.”

The warm hand left Rowdy’s shoulder, and Gil moved away to remount his horse, leaving Rowdy staring up at the heavens.

As the sky turned a shade of dusky pink to the east Gil rode back to Rowdy, pointing. “See ‘em, three in a line. Some call ‘em Las Tres Marías. Others see it as the belt of a hunter, with a sword. There’s names for everythin’ up there - course, those names change, dependin’ on if you’re askin’ a white man, or a Lakota, or a Cherokee, or even a Mexican. But they all looked up there an’ saw somethin’.”

Rowdy shook his head. “All I see’s lights, an’ plenty of ‘em.”

Gil laughed. “Me too, sometimes, kid. Me too.”
Chapter 4

It was two days later that Gil rode up to him after they’d set off for the day.

“Goin’ to town,” he said, gesturing off over the plain. “Pete’ll look after the herd.”

Rowdy took that information as his invitation, wondering why the man couldn’t just come out and ask him straight, and followed Gil as he turned away and kicked his horse into a gentle canter.

“You were in the war, then?” He asked, once he’d caught up. He’d been wondering, and it made sense - he supposed Gil had been an officer. He certainly seemed at home giving orders. He supposed everyone had been. Some of them men talked about it some evenings. Reliving victories. Rowdy didn’t join in.

“Yup,” Gil answered.

Rowdy shook his head. Why did the man have to be so difficult.

“See a lot of fighting?” He pushed.

“More’n I ever wanted to,” Gil answered.

Rowdy gave a huff of agreement.

“You?”

He supposed he should have expected the question. And he knew there was no shame in his answer, but he still didn’t like to give it.

“Some. Then got…took prisoner.”

Gil just nodded, the movement almost lost with the motion of man and horse.

He watched closely, but there was no flicker of emotion on Gil’s face. He’d found that most people had something to say about it. Whether the implication that he somehow hadn’t done his bit, a sympathetic comment or some sort of blame, as if he’d wanted that outcome.

“Ain’t got nothin’ to say about it?” He asked eventually.

Gil turned slowly and fixed him with a look. “Like what?”

“Like…weren’t I lucky, sittin’ out the fightin’, or…somethin’?”

“Were you?” Gil asked.

Rowdy paused, then shook his head, wishing he’d never begun the conversation. Sometimes Gil just made him feel stupid. Like he talked too much, with too little to say.

The rode on for a few minutes, then Gil slowed slightly.

“You’re doin’ a good job,” he said.

Rowdy stared, then frowned. “Really?”
“You don’t think so?” There was the hint of a smile on Gil’s lips.

“No, I mean, yeah, I think I am,” Rowdy answered, trying to both accept the compliment and show he was confident in his own abilities.

Gil just nodded.

Rowdy continued frowning, wondering where the sudden compliment had come from. He also remembered Wishbone’s words though.

As they neared the town Gil dug into his pocket. “Here. Go to the store, need a sack of coffee, an’ one of sugar. Then try an’ get the mail. Meet you back in the saloon. You got any left, buy yourself a drink.”

Rowdy took the offered coins and nodded. As they approached the edge of town he split away from Gil and headed to the telegraph office, as Gil went down the main street.

He picked up the pile of mail that had accumulated for them, then headed to the store, resisting the urge to look through the envelopes to see if there was any for him.

In the store he had to wait as other customers chatted and bought their items. He browsed the shelves, picking up the odd thing, biding his time. He supposed once he’d been paid he should get a new shirt. His was barely holding together anymore.

Gil stopped outside the bank and tied his horse to the rail, easily stepping up onto the high boardwalk.

The bank was deserted, door firmly locked.

“Ain’t no one there, Mister,” a man called to him. “Old Roberts, he upped an’ died. Waitin’ for them to send a new man.”

“There ain’t no one can get in?” Gil frowned.

“Nope, not ’til the bank sends a new man, an’ that won’t be for another week.”

Gil shook his head, but he still had some money in his pocket, and it would just mean instead of sending Wishbone in to the next town he’d have to go along too. He didn’t mind too much. Wishbone, for all that he carried on, was a good judge of character, and it would be worth having a chat to him now the drive had shook down some.

“All right, thanks.”

He headed down the boardwalk and into the sheriff’s office, nodding to the man behind the desk.

“Hi, name’s Favor. I, uh, I spoke to the sheriff back in Rileyville. Found a body, near the trail. He said he’d ask around, see if anyone was missin’.”

The sheriff nodded. “Sure, sure, we got word. You found him, eh?”

Gil nodded.
“So what brings you in to Saxon, Favor?”

“Jus’ figured, if you did know who it was, I could tell ‘em where we buried him,” Gil shrugged.

The sheriff nodded again. “Well sure, that’s mighty kind of you. You got anything from him? Belongings?”

Gil shook his head. “Give it in to the man at Rileyville, figured it was the only way to find out who he was. Just a watch, few coins.”

“An’ where was it you found him?” The sheriff asked, leaning back on his chair.

“’Bout two miles other side of the river. Back a ways, we come down through the pass near Rileyville to cross over in the shallows, found him in the trees, bottom of a cliff. Put a marker there, but didn’t have no name.”

“Well, you sure can ride out and speak to ‘em. Bailey’s the name - head out of town on this road, it’s the first ranch you come to. The Bar H. I’m sure they’d be pleased to hear you give him a decent burial.”

“Obliged to you,” Gil touched his hat and left, swinging up into his saddle with ease and kicking his horse into a gentle canter.

The ranch he came to looked deserted - a door to a barn gently swung back and forth in the breeze, the glass on the house was caked in dust.

He tied his horse to one of the fences, pushed his hat back on his head and looked around.

“Hello?” He called out, as he headed for the front door.

There was no answer, and none when he banged his fist on the door, either.

He tried the handle, and the door swung open, revealing a room which evidently hadn’t been lived in for some time. He shook his head, wondering if he’d got the wrong place. But the sign hanging above the gateway definitely said Bar H Ranch.

A noise made him turn, and he saw some riders approaching at a gallop. He walked back outside, tucked his thumbs into the front of his belt and waited.

“Don’t move, Mister,” was the first thing said to him.

He’d instinctively shifted his right hand to hover over his gun as soon as he’d seen two of the approaching men had their own weapons drawn.

“Sheriff,” he nodded to the one man he recognised. “Seems like no-one’s home,” he gestured to the house.

“Throw down your gun, real easy,” the sheriff gestured, drawing his own gun. “We don’t want no trouble.”

Gil hesitated. “Sure looks like you’re out to find it.”

“Do like he says, Mister,” one of the other man said, cocking his pistol.
He carefully pulled his pistol out, holding it between his finger and thumb, and threw it a few feet in front of him.

The sheriff dismounted, picking it up and stuffing it into his own waistband.

“Now tell us what really happened, Mister,” one of the other men said.

“I…don’t know what you’re talkin’ about,” Gil answered. “We jus’ found his body, ’s all.”

“We know you must have took it,” the other man supplied. “We found his horse, and there weren’t nothin’ in them saddlebags. An’ now you come ridin’ in here for no reason.”

Gil shook his head. “Like I said, we took a watch and some coins in a pouch off him, nothin’ else. Then we dug him in. I can tell you where, but that’s all I know.”

The sheriff gestured with his gun and one of the men dismounted, circling around Gil.

“If I could tell you anythin’ else, I would,” Gil protested. “Ain’t no reason for me to keep anythin’ from you. I ain’t got no interest in whatever’s goin’ on.”

His arms were grabbed, and he fought to free himself instinctively.

A bullet hit the dirt a few inches from his right foot.

“Next one’ll be in you,” the sheriff snarled.

Rowdy took another handful of pretzels, dropping them on the wooden bar and methodically dipping each one in the last bit of his beer. He’d been waiting a while, and wasn’t sure what to do.

He ate the last of the snacks, swallowed the beer, picked up the sack at his feet and headed outside, looking up and down for any sign of Gil or his horse. There was nothing, so he dropped the sack and sat on the edge of the boardwalk, waiting. He wondered if he should just ride back to the herd. He was pretty sure Gil wouldn’t just have forgotten him. But he had no idea what business he could be on that was keeping him for so long.

Gil’s wrists had been tied tightly, and a fist driven into his stomach as he tried to convince the three men that he knew nothing about whatever they were trying to find.

“Tell us, Mister,” the man who had tied him growled. “He alive when you found him? You lyin’ to us?”

“Told you, I don’t know what you’re talkin about!” Gil protested. “An’ he were well dead.”

The man’s fist slammed into his face, and he staggered slightly, tasting blood as it flowed from his nose down his top lip.

“Hey, I seen him comin’ in to town,” the other man suddenly said. “He was with someone - maybe he’s tryin’ to stall an’ they’ll get away?”

“Get him to the barn - and his horse,” the sheriff ordered.

Gil was dragged to the barn, a gun in his ribs.
“Now don’t you go doin’ nothin’, or when we find your friend, we’ll kill him,” the man who had punched him warned.

Gil began to turn, when something smashed into his skull. He crumpled to the ground, face down in the old, damp straw.

Rowdy wished he’d eaten more than pretzels and a hard boiled egg. He glanced toward a building down the road that claimed to be a kitchen, and the smell coming from it made his stomach rumble.

Three riders rode into the street at the far end, and he saw the sun glint from the chest of one of them. He paused for a second, then stood, stretching, as they approached. He wondered if the sheriff would know where the missing trail boss was. One of the other men pointed toward him.

The men stopped outside the saloon, and the sheriff looked at him. “You with that other cowhand came in? Favor?”

Rowdy nodded. “Yeah, you know where he is?”

“Sure do - he’s askin’ for you,” the sheriff smiled. “Horse threw him, ways up the road, he’s bein’ looked after, but he wanted t’ speak to you.”

Rowdy grabbed his bag of supplies and grabbed the reins of his horse, mounting quickly. “He okay?”

“Oh sure, sure, jus’ a bit roughed up. He just told us you’d be waitin’, figured we should come an’ find you.”

Rowdy frowned - he’d never seen Gil come off a horse yet. He looked like he was born in the saddle. But maybe his horse had trod in a gopher hole and gone down or something.

He tied the sack onto the horn of his saddle and fell into line with the men, heading out of the town.

Gil could smell damp and rot. His head pounded. He tried to open his eyes, but one of them stuck closed. He lifted his head a little to look around and regretted it. The barn was empty, apart from his horse, tied up at the other end, and heaps of rotting straw. By his head was a small pile of his belongings - his tobacco, cheroots, coin pouch and trail log and the soft leather belt he wore under his shirt which contained the bills of sale and documents to show he was authorised to drive the beeves in his herd. His shirt was untucked and he’d obviously been thoroughly searched. A few scuffles and scurrying sounds told him he wasn’t completely alone. Then he heard hoofbeats outside, so dropped his head back down to the soft, wet straw, and closed his eye again.

There were voices, and he recognised Rowdy’s, even though he wasn’t certain of what was being said. He hoped it would be a rescue, but had a horrible feeling it wasn’t going to be. He decided he had to do something to try and warn the kid.

“ROWDY!” He yelled, almost making himself sick as the pain pulsed through his head. “Get outta here!”
The second Rowdy heard the shout the tone of voice meant he knew something was wrong - but there was a pistol in his back before he could react.

“Go,” the sheriff shoved him. “In the barn.”

It took his eyes a moment to get used to the gloom, then he saw Gil on the floor, struggling to roll onto his side.

“What the…” he began.

“Just shut it. You two in this together?” One of the men asked.

“I told you, neither of us know nothin’,” Gil said, tiredly.

“We’ll see. Tie him up too,” the sheriff gestured to Rowdy. “And search him.”

Rowdy’s wrists were tied, then his pockets searched, his pocket knife and the few coins he had as change were thrown to the ground, then the bundle of the post was found and also rifled through before being thrown aside.

“Nothin’,” the man searching declared.

“Which is what I told you,” Gil said, angrily, trying to sit up.

The man closest to him shoved him back down with his foot.

Rowdy frowned at the blood which had congealed down Gil’s face, and guessed he’d fought when he’d been caught.

“Check ‘em again. Their hats, everythin’.”

One of the men kicked Rowdy’s legs out from under him, and he hit the floor with a woosh of breath.

They removed Gil and Rowdy’s hats, checking inside, around the hat band, then threw them aside. Next was their pockets, again, and as the man in front of Rowdy knelt down and leaned in to check his pockets Rowdy kicked out.

“Get offa me!” He kicked the man again as he tried to get up.

“You bastard,” the man spat as he picked himself up off the floor, and punched Rowdy in the face.

The sheriff moved in and held Rowdy down as the others finished going through his pockets, checking the lining of his vest and even inside his holster.

Finally they gave up.

“So?” One of them said to the sheriff.

“We’ll go an’ dig him up. He’s already told me where the body is.”

Rowdy was tied to the next post along from Gil.

As their captors turned to leave Gil called out again.
“Hey, Mister, could you jus’ light me up one of them cheroots?” He nodded to the pile of his belongings on the floor.

The man hesitated, then nodded, holding out one of the small cigars for Gil to take with his teeth, then sparking a match on the wall and lighting it.

Gil nodded his thanks, blowing smoke through his nose.

The door of the barn was closed, leaving only a little light coming in through various cracks in the woodwork.

Rowdy looked across to the dull red glow of Gil’s cheroot.

Neither of them spoke until the sound of hoofbeats had faded.

“What do they want?” Rowdy asked, breaking the silence.

“I don’t rightly know,” Gil answered, sounding thoughtful.

Rowdy sighed.

“How much can you move?” Gil asked.

“I…dunno,” Rowdy wriggled a bit, testing his bonds.

Gil moved too, lying on his side, stretching out.

“Turn a bit, wanna get to your ropes,” Gil said, straining toward Rowdy.

Rowdy obeyed, and after more shifting an wriggling he felt the warmth of Gil’s breath on his fingers.

“Now stay still,” Gil ordered, through clenched teeth, voice muffled as his head was wedged between the wall and Rowdy’s back.

Gil was at full stretch, the muscles in his neck screaming as he fought to stay still, gently touching the glowing end of the cheroot to Rowdy’s ropes, making sure he didn’t put it out, trying to regulate his breathing to keep the tobacco alight. His Spurs dug into the wooden wall as he forced himself closer to Rowdy. It felt like his arms were going to be pulled from their sockets. A couple of times he had to stop and rest his head on the ground, as Rowdy did all he could to give him room and make the task easier.

“Near done,” Gil said between clenched teeth.

Rowdy pulled on the ropes, hoping it would help, and finally he felt the sudden give in the binding, and heard Gil groan as he could finally rest.

He set about unwrapping the ropes, flexing his fingers as the blood flowed back into his hands.

“You okay?” He asked, as they finally fell away and he could move.

Gil just grunted, head still resting on the ground.
Rowdy shook his hands out, then turned to examine Gil’s ropes, kneeling over him, feeling his way in the gloom.

“Here,” he picked at the knot, grimacing as he saw how tight it was, and how hard Gil must have been pulling against it. Then he remembered their knives, and grabbed one, sawing at the bindings until they suddenly gave.

Gil groaned again as his arms were finally free, and pushed himself up to sitting, still smoking the last of the cheroot.

“Want me to look at your head?” Rowdy offered, stuffing his things back into his pockets.

“Need to get outta here,” Gil answered. “Then we’ll see.”

He rubbed his sleeve over his face, wincing slightly, but clearing enough of the blood away to feel a little better and open his eye again.

“They leave our saddles?” He asked.

Rowdy nodded. “Left everything.”

“’S try an’ get out of here then,” Gil stood, swayed slightly, then shoved his belongings back into his pockets and headed for the door.

It hadn’t looked that sturdy, but proved harder than expected to get through.

Rowdy kicked it, then hit it with his shoulder.

“Try another place,” Gil said, sounding tired. “Might be a rotten board.”

They each took a side of the barn and worked around it, Rowdy frequently glancing back at Gil, who seemed a little unsteady on his feet.

He had no idea of the extent of Gil’s injuries, but he didn’t suppose he’d gone down without a fight, and the blood that had covered his face when Rowdy first arrived spoke of some injuries beyond the black eye he could see.

“Here,” he called softly, finding a plank which was rotting away and kicking it, breaking a chunk off. “Reckon we can squeeze out.”

Gil came over and had a look, then looked back to the horses. “Rather take ‘em too. Maybe we can find some tools, break the lock. Let’s see.”

Rowdy squeezed through the gap first, checking for signs of their captors, then helping to pull Gil through.

“Check the house, I’ll do out here,” Gil gestured.

It took about five minutes for them both to return with what they’d found. Rowdy had an old fire poker, Gil a piece of strap iron from a hinge.

“Come on, might be able to get the lock off.”

They fought with the lock for a few minutes, trying to prise away at the hasp, before Gil gave up,
leaning on the wall, facing away from Rowdy.

“You okay, Boss?” Rowdy frowned.

“Yeah, yeah, jus’…” Gil gestured vaguely at his head. He turned back to see Rowdy fighting with the lock a little more. A strange expression came over his face.

“You sure…” Rowdy started.

“Need to make sure they don’t come back,” Gil said, seeming to suddenly be re-energised. “Could end up far worse. I…might’ve figured out what they’re up to.”

Rowdy nodded. “Should take ‘em…what…’til morning, at least, to get back?”

“Don’t know all of ‘em went though, do we? Could be one of ‘em just went to town, an’l’ll be back any time.”

“Oh…yeah…” Rowdy looked out along the road. Darkness was falling, and it was hard to see far. “So…can’t go into town, be a long walk back to the herd. What do we do?”

Gil leant his back on the barn and shook his head. “Wish I knew.”

“Come on, might be easier ‘round where we got out,” Rowdy said. “Reckon with these we’d have more luck.” He hefted the poker in his hand.

Gil took a detour to the water trough, and scooped some up, washing off his face and hair.

Rowdy did most of the work, with Gil pitching in when necessary. Rowdy didn’t care - he just wanted to get away. He caught a few moments when Gil was obviously in pain, eyes squeezed closed, hand rubbing over his forehead, but he didn’t stop to ask - he didn’t figure there was much he could do to help, beyond get their horses and get them away from danger.

“Here, help,” he said, wrenching on a tough board - the higher he got the drier and stronger the wood was.

Gil was by his side immediately, and they worked together until finally the timber gave way with a crunching splinter, causing them both to stumble backward.

“Doin’ good,” Gil said, panting. “Must be near enough room.”

Finally enough of the boards gave way that they both stopped. Rowdy scrunched his nose up - his face ached where he’d been hit, but he was fairly sure there was no real damage done.

“C’mon,” Gil stepped inside.

Outside was still just about light, but in the barn Rowdy could barely see anything. He followed the noise of Gil walking, and heard the low soothing words to the horses. He couldn’t help but smile a little.

“Hey, hey, easy now, easy,” he heard Gil saying, as his horse nickered. “C’mon, shhhh.”

Rowdy’s hand found Gil’s back first, sliding over the soft leather of his vest. He reached out the other way, keeping contact with Gil, his eyes picking out the shape of his own horse in the gloom.
He almost tripped over something, but a quick investigation found it was the sack, complete with the bags of coffee and sugar. He wished they’d needed to buy something he could actually eat, though.

“C’mon, boy,” he said, fumbling for his horse’s reins and gathering them up. “Let’s get outta here.”

Once outside they both mounted up, and Rowdy tied the sack back onto his saddle.

“Ready?” Gil’s deep voice came out of the darkness.

“Sure,” Rowdy answered. “Let’s go.”

The horses were sure footed enough that they just let them pick their way. They headed to the west of the town, skirting it by some distance, although they could make out a few faint lights.

“Any idea where we’re headin’?” Rowdy asked. He’d seen the map a few times, when Gil would sit down at night and check it, but he couldn’t remember much of what he’d seen. “What did you figure out back there?”

There was silence for a moment. Then Gil sighed. “Figure…we need t’go back to town.”

“What!” Rowdy did his best to stare into the darkness. “Back to…you mad? We don’t know if one of them’s there, or if…an’ we’d be right back to what we just got out of.”

“I know, I know, but…Look,” Gil reined in, looked around, and leant forward, resting his elbow on the horn of his saddle. “They kept askin’ what that dead fellow had on him. An’ he really didn’t have much. The watch, the money - that was all as had any value. But he also had tobacco, like most everyone does, few matches. Well, it weren’t no good to anyone, but I checked it anyhow, make sure he didn’t have no foldin’ money in his tobacco pouch or nothin’. An’ he didn’t - just a scrap of paper, with some numbers an’ letters on it.”

Rowdy nodded. “You still got it?”

Gil shook his head. “No, di’n’t seem like nothin’ to pay no mind to. But I remember the numbers.”

“So…you think it’s…important?” Rowdy asked.

“When we got into town today, I wanted to draw out some money. But bank was all shut up - man told me the banker upped an died, week or so ago. They’re waitin’ on the new man.”

Rowdy nodded again, not at all sure where the story was going, but doing his best to follow it.

“An’ seein’ you earlier, pryin’ on that lock…now I figure those letters an’ numbers, it was the combination to the safe. They want to get the money, ‘fore the new man comes. No need to crack the safe, see? Jus’ get an’ do it, by the time the new man gets here and realises, no one remembers anythin’, no one saw anythin’, they’d get clean away with robbin’ their own town.”

“The…but…it’s the sheriff!” Rowdy protested.

Gil shrugged. “Well he definitely ain’t gonna catch ’em, then, is he? Must have it all figured out - right until the one we found out there on the trail ran an’ died.”

“So…now what?” Rowdy asked.

Gil sat up and stretched.
“They’ll be back here tomorrow. Maybe won’t do it in daylight…so…”

“So?” Rowdy prompted.

Gil gave him a small smile, barely a glint of teeth in the moonlight. “So, tonight, we’re gonna rob a bank.”

Rowdy stared. Then shook his head, rubbing his hand over his shirtfront, and wondered if he was dreaming. He wondered if he’d dreamt up the whole thing. Maybe he’d never woken up for that nightwatch - never seen Jim and Joe, never talked about the stars with Gil, never ended up in this town. In a minute he’d be woken none to gently by Gil giving him a kick, and camp would be just like it always was, breakfast cooking, men wandering around shaving and grumbling, Wishbone grouching and threatening.

“We…” He shook his head again. It couldn’t be real.

“What else can we do? Ain’t no one near to tell - an’ they wouldn’t believe us anyhow. An’ if we leave it, they’ll get away with it. So.”

“How’s…but if we do it then…that’s just as bad!” Rowdy protested. “I don’t want to rob no bank, I don’t wanna go to jail.”

“We ain’t gonna…look, come on, we ain’t got much time.”

Rowdy followed Gil, still wondering what he was getting himself into.

Gil stopped still some distance from town, in a small patch of woodland near a water hole. They stripped off their chaps, spurs, empty gun belts and hats and left them by the horses.

“Look, ‘f you don’t wanna…I understand,” Gil said. “You can stay right here, mind the horses.”

“Oh no,” Rowdy shook his head. “No, no, no, I ain’t lettin’ you go in there alone.”

Gil nodded. “Let’s go then.”
Chapter 5

Wishbone stared at the man who’d entered the camp a few minutes previously. “An’ just what interest is it of yours who we buried?” He asked, sticking his chin out defiantly.

“I ain’t askin’ that,” the man protested. “Just askin’ who it was buried him. Just want to thank him is all! He were my brother.”

Wishbone softened slightly. “Oh. Well, why didn’t you say. Joe! Man here wants t’speak to you.”

Joe turned, looking worried. Then stood, passing his plate to Quince at his side.

“Yes Mister?”

“You buried the man you found?” The visitor asked.

“Well yes, Sir.” Joe nodded. “Boss found him, asked if I’d bury him, put a marker up.”

“Was there…was there anything on him, any…personal belongings?”

“Well, no Sir, none what I saw,” Joe shook his head.

The visitor shook his head, looking sad.

“I am sorry, Mister. Maybe the boss’d know, but he ain’t back from town yet,” Joe offered. “Like I said, it were him found the body, an’ he rode in to Rileyville, to tell the sheriff there. I sure can ask him when he comes back.”

“Oh, no, no, that isn’t necessary. I’m sure…well, thank you, anyway.”

Joe nodded. “Least we could do, Mister, give him a proper burial. We said a few words over him, an’ all.”

“Well thank you. It is a comfort,” the man nodded, then turned to leave.

“Say Mister, it’s pretty dark,” Wishbone said. “You’d be welcome to bed down here if you didn’t want t’ride back to town.”

“Oh, no, I’ll be fine, thank you,” the man touched his hat and headed back to his horse.

Once he’d disappeared into the gloom Pete wandered over and stood by Wishbone.

“What d’you think that was about?”

Wishbone shrugged. “Maybe the man was just doin’ like he said, thankin’ us for spadin’ in his brother.”

Pete frowned. “An’ the Boss an’ Rowdy should be back. They were only goin’ for a few supplies. Should’ve been back hours ago.”

Wishbone huffed. “Well ain’t no point all you jaspers goin’ out an’ ridin’ about in this darkness. So don’t go thinkin’ it. If they ain’t back by breakfast, then…”

Pete nodded. “Guess you’re right. First thing, though…”
Rowdy stuck close to Gil - which wasn’t that easy. The other man wore dark clothing and seemed fairly good at moving quietly. Rowdy wondered what he’d been like in the army. And then wondered if he’d ever robbed a bank before. He didn’t suppose it would be that hard, as the herd moved, to rob a few banks. Although three thousand cows would probably make for a slow getaway.

The town was quiet, apart from a bit of noise from the saloon - someone was playing the piano very badly, and there was some raucous song.

Gil led the way to the back of the bank, glancing around. The walls were brick, and the door seemed solid.

“Gonna try the front?” Rowdy whispered.

Gil shook his head. “Whole street’d see us.”

“Then…”

Gil pointed upward. “Roof. Now…be quiet.”

Rowdy found himself frowning again, and seriously wondering if Gil had had a past life as a thief, as he watched his boss manage to climb a drainpipe and onto the roof of a neighbouring building.

“C’mon,” Gil called softly, and reached for him as he scrambled up. “Reckon we’ll be able to get in.”

They worked together, prising up the shingles, all the while keeping a watch on the street below.

Eventually there was a big enough gap for Gil to squeeze through.

He slid through, feet feeling for the rafters. Once he found something solid enough to stand on he managed to crouch down.

“Hurry up,” he hissed to Rowdy, and guided the dangling legs which appeared onto another rafter.

Gil struck a match and they looked around - there was a hatch leading down into the bank, and they examined it.

“Must have a bolt on the other side,” Gil said. “Let’s see.”

“We…really doin’ this?” Rowdy asked, quickly.

“Sure,” Gil nodded. “What else can we do?” He brought his boot down on one of the planks which made up the ceiling, just by the hatch. There was a slight wrenching sound, as some of the nails gave a little. The timber rafters shook slightly.

Rowdy wasn’t sure he had an answer - but he was fairly sure that anything that didn’t involve robbing a bank was probably a better solution.

Gil stamped again, and a gap opened up between the beam and the plank. After a few minutes of struggle and stamping a few more times Gil managed to reach through the gap and fumbled to find the bolt on the hatch. Finally he drew it back, then releasing the hatch which dropped suddenly, then swung back and forth on its hinges.
“Stay here, an’ listen out,” Gil ordered. “I ain’t gonna get back up here without your help.”

Rowdy nodded, his mouth dry.

“’F anything goes wrong, get out an’ go back to the drive, get Pete an’ Wish, right?”

Rowdy nodded again. “Sure thing, Boss.”

Gil sat on the edge of the hatch and smoothly slid through, dangling for a second, then dropping to the floor, immediately going into a crouch.

He crept around the counter, then hunkered down by the large safe. He waited for a moment, listening as footsteps went past on the boardwalk outside, then squinted at the safe dial.

It was too dark, and although he hated doing so, he turned his back to the windows onto the street and struck a match.

Immediately he span the dial, working it back and forth from memory. The soft ‘clunk’ as the lock disengaged came just as his fingertips were burned by the match. He dropped it, then carefully picked up the stub, crushing it between his fingers to ensure it was fully out, then stuffing it into his pocket.

The safe had various papers in it, and bundles of cash, wrapped in their paper sleeves. He looked around, trying to find something to put the money in. The office was unlocked, so he crept inside that, too, looking around in the gloom.

Rowdy tried not to fidget. Every time he heard a noise he tensed, but no one ever seemed to stop or take any notice of the bank.

Finally he heard a noise below him.

“Hey,” Gil called. “Gimme a hand.”

He reached down, and with quite a lot of struggle, managed to help Gil back up through the hole, mainly by grabbing the back of his belt and hauling him up.

“You…” he started.

“Let’s go,” Gil cut him off. “Sooner we’re away from here the better.”

Between them they managed to lift the hatch back into place and slid the bolt across again, leaving only a few loose planks in the ceiling to show they had ever been there.

Rowdy scrambled back out onto the roof, sending one shingle slithering down into the gutter. He froze, but the music from the saloon was still loud, and there didn’t seem to be anyone in the dark street behind the bank.

As soon as Gil was beside him they shoved all the shingles they could back in place haphazardly, just covering the hole as best they could, then made their way back to the street, staying in a crouch as they jumped back onto the dirt street.

“Wait here a second,” Gil said. “Don’t…look suspicious. In fact, start walkin’ back, easy like - as if you’re jus’ out for a stroll. I’ll catch you up.”
“But…” Rowdy began to protest, however Gil was already striding down the street away from him.

He heard swift footsteps behind him before he was halfway to their horses, and turned to see the figure of Gil appearing out of the gloom.

“Here.”

He fumbled slightly as a gun was pressed into his hand. “What…where…” he started.

“Jus’ fig’red I’d feel better with some iron on my hip,” Gil answered, grimly. “Borrowed ‘em off folk who’s too drunk to have ‘em safe anyway.”

Rowdy swallowed and nodded, stuffing the gun into his belt. He felt better too. But now they’d escaped the sheriff, robbed a bank and stolen someone else’s guns. He was sure that no one had ever mentioned that being a ramrod involved going on crime sprees.

They rode for more than an hour, letting the horses pick their way over the terrain. Rowdy glanced up sometimes, and knew from his lesson on stars that they were heading vaguely north.

“Should stop,” Gil finally said. “There’s a ridge up ahead, it’ll give us a lookout.”

Rowdy nodded. He was tired, but more than that, he was hungry. His stomach gurgled loudly.

Rowdy trusted his horse to follow Gil’s, and felt the land rising up. Occasionally a hoof would slip on stone, but they climbed steadily. The moon was casting a slight glow on their surroundings, and Rowdy could just about make out shapes in the shadows.

“Guess this’ll do,” Gil said quietly, making Rowdy jump.

They dismounted and tied the horses to a small bush.

It didn’t take them long to drag the saddles from the horses, and Rowdy looked around - there were plenty of rocks, and a small patch of dirt, where it had fetched up behind some large boulders.

He dropped his saddle there, and reached around for his blanket. He realised Gil was just standing still, watching back the way they had come.

“Anythin’?” He asked.

Gil slowly shook his head.

“I’ll get some wood,” Rowdy glanced around. “Get a fire on.”

“No, no fire,” Gil’s hand closed around his arm. “It’d be like a beacon.”

Rowdy sighed. It made sense, but he was tired, cold and hungry.

“C’mon, bed down,” Gil said softly, removing his chaps and spreading them on the ground. Then he wrapped his saddle blanket over his shoulders and sat heavily, leaning back against the large boulder.
Rowdy joined him, also sitting on the soft leather, hoping it would protect him a little from the damp ground. It meant they had to sit close, shoulder to shoulder, but Rowdy was happy with that, happy for any spot of warmth.

The thin material of his blanket wasn’t really enough, and Rowdy pulled it tighter around himself.

“How’re you doin’? Nose broke?” Gil asked, quietly.

Rowdy gave it a poke. It ached, but not so badly. “Nah. You? Your head okay?”

He felt Gil move beside him. “Yeah, ain’t too bad.”

Rowdy wished he could see better. As it was he glanced sideways anyway. He could just make out Gil’s profile.

He guessed Gil wasn’t the type to shy away from a fight - he certainly had a few scars, the distinctive flattening of a nose that had been punched a few times. But aside from that first impression, there didn’t seem much about his demeanour that showed he was a fighter.

“Here.”

Rowdy felt something being pushed at him.

“What…?” He fumbled, half holding on to Gil’s cold hand, trying to take whatever was being offered.

“’S jerky. Ain’t much, been in my saddlebag a while, but…”

Rowdy smiled, managing to grab the jerky and biting into a piece, wrestling his teeth through it until a bit broke off and chewing it contentedly.

It was only after he’d eaten half of the first strip that he realised Gil wasn’t waging a similar battle.

“You…” he chewed a bit more. “You not eatin’?”

“I’m all right for a minute,” Gil answered, and Rowdy could swear he could hear the smile in Gil’s tone. “Smoke?”

“No, I don’t. Thanks,” Rowdy answered.

Gil rolled one, then turned, striking the match on the rock behind them, the sudden flare of light hidden best he could between the two of them.

They sat in silence for a while, Rowdy chewing on the tough meat, Gil smoking.

“When… I got back,” Rowdy said, hesitantly, wanting to fill the silence. “My ma said I’d eat her out of house ‘n home.”

He didn’t think Gil was going to answer, but finally heard the intake of breath, a slight rise of the shoulder that leant against his.

“Don’t guess you got much food, in prison?”

Rowdy shook his head. Then realised it was a useless gesture, in the dark. “No. Not much.”

“Sorry, probably don’t want to talk about it.”
Rowdy sighed. “Find it’s mostly other people don’t want to talk about it.”

Gil nodded slowly. “Must’ve been hard, all that time, nothin’ to be done, ‘cept…wait it out. Survive.”

Now it was Rowdy’s turn to let the silence stretch. “Yeah,” he said softly, feeling like he owed Gil some sort of answer, now he’d said he didn’t mind talking. “Kept hopin’ someone…’d come, get us out.”

“Sorry.”

Rowdy shifted so he was looking in Gil’s direction. He could just make out the soft sheen of moonlight on his hair.

“For what?”

Gil shrugged again. “I don’t know. Sorry we di’n’t get you out. Sorry so many kids like you di’n’t get to grow up right. Sorry for the whole damn war.”

Rowdy frowned, thinking on that. Most people he’d met seemed to still want to be fighting it. He wasn’t sure what he’d want, if he’d been on the battlefield the whole time. By the time he knew they’d lost he was just glad it was over and he’d be set free. He’d never really thought far beyond that. He was proud, though, that he’d done his bit, stood up and fought for his people. Gil didn’t sound at all proud.

“So you didn’t fancy stayin’ home, with your ma?” Gil asked, voice soft again. “Bet she wanted you to, once you was back.”

“I…yeah, she wanted me to,” Rowdy said. “But…figured I needed to…you know, get a job. An’…” He stopped, unable to explain why he needed to leave home, leave his ma, who would have kept him safe and fed and certainly not have let him end up on the run after a bank robbery with a man he’d barely known a few weeks by his side.

“I…went back east, after. My girls, they’re in Philadelphia,” Gil sighed. “But…I didn’t fit there. I ain’t sure I fit anywhere, now. But I sure as hell didn’t fit there.”

“Girls?” Rowdy leant his head back against the rock, looked up at the stars. He picked out a few shapes, but he wasn’t sure they were the ones Gil had told him about.

“My daughters.”

Rowdy frowned again at that. “Daughters?” He echoed.

There was a huff of breath. “Yeah. Gillian and Maggie. I…went back to see ‘em, but…I mean, I had to work, had to earn. But it wasn’t…No one there wanted someone like me. Even if I coulda found something to turn my hand to.”

Rowdy felt what was probably a shake of Gil’s head.

“I know,” he agreed. Because he hadn’t fit either, even though he’d gone home, not into enemy territory. Whatever he’d done, it felt wrong. Until he just had to get away. He wondered if that’s why Gil had taken him on. If he’d seen that inside him and recognised it. “They…with your wife?”

“Huh? No, no, their Aunt. My wife…died.”
Rowdy gave a small sigh. “Sorry.”

He just about made out the hand waving away the pointless apology.

“I guess I understand, you know….why,” he said, slowly. “I mean why Ma wanted to…my sister died. She jus’ wanted me to stay an’ be with her. But…”

The silence stretched, both of them lost in memories, in trying to sort through the chaos of the war and the way it had wrenched their lives apart as much as it had wrenched the country apart.

Rowdy was vaguely aware of Gil rubbing his forehead, as if it was still paining him.

“Should sleep,” Gil finally said. “Take turns, just in case.”

“You first,” Rowdy answered. “You got the hit on the head.”

Gil shifted, not arguing, curling onto his side, blanket wrapped around his upper body, head on his saddle.

Rowdy looked down at him. He didn’t really know much about doctoring, but he figured sleeping was probably good for most things.

He shivered, and moved a little closer to Gil, so his thigh rested against Gil’s back. It wasn’t much, but at least a small part of him felt warm. He found the gentle movement of Gil breathing soothing. Sometimes, when he’d been stuck in the prison camp, night time had been the only peace they got. Sometimes just hearing other people breathing around him was something of a comfort. Too often though there would be noise. Coughing, crying out, or having nightmares, lonely, eerie sounds of men fighting their demons.

He chewed on the last of the jerky, and it slowly dawned on him that Gil hadn’t eaten any. And had almost certainly given it all to him. He frowned a little, not knowing what to make of such a gesture.

Somehow, even though they were out, alone, on what seemed like an insane adventure, Rowdy was still glad he was there. He’d spent weeks going from town to town, trying to find work. Everywhere he’d been either hadn’t wanted anyone, or hadn’t wanted him.

He’d been just about ready to punch Gil Favor when he’d got the same answer, and then seen the men at the bar, drinking their wages before they’d even earned them. He knew they’d quit, and he knew he wouldn’t, and he couldn’t see why Gil didn’t get that.

After the past few weeks he still wasn’t entirely certain why Gil had given some of those men the chance to join the drive. But then, he supposed, he wasn’t entirely sure why he’d been given that same chance, so he didn’t mind too much.

He had no idea what the time was when he jumped awake as his head tipped back and hit the rock he sat against. He stared, wide eyed, and listened. There was no sound, beyond the gentle rustle of the wind in the leaves. The stars had moved a long way though, so he figured quite a few hours must have passed.

Gently, almost not wanting to, he shook Gil’s shoulder.

“Huh?”
Rowdy noticed Gil’s hand going to his hip reflexively, fingers curling around the gun before his eyes were even open. It made him wonder what sort of life Gil had had, where being woken up meant he needed to go for his gun.

“Sorry,” he said softly. ‘I’m jus’…fallin’ asleep here. Figured, if you din’t mind, we could switch for a bit?”

“Sure, sure,” Gil sat up and scrubbed his face with his hands.

Rowdy didn’t bother to move, just tipped his head back against the hard rock and closed his eyes.

Gil took a few deep breaths, trying to wake himself up. Then rolled a cigarette, not needing any light to complete the ritual he’d performed a thousand times.

Finally he struck a match, careful to hide the flare as best he could in the crown of his hat. He kept the cigarette cupped in his hand, blinking to try to get his night vision back.

Rowdy was slowly but surely sliding sideways onto him. A heavy weight against his left shoulder. Gently snoring, each breath seeming to let him sag a little lower against Gil, until there were strands of unruly hair tickling Gil’s neck and ear, and Rowdy’s elbow was virtually in his groin.

He sighed, gave a shake of his head and turned slightly, catching Rowdy’s weight as he slid, glad when he didn’t waken as Gil rearranged him so his head was resting in Gil’s lap. He looked down at the sleeping man and couldn’t help but think of his girls when they were younger - they’d get so tired that they’d sleep through a riot, a dead weight in his arms if he had to carry them to bed.

He gently let his hand rest on Rowdy’s arm, rearranging the blanket a little, and smoked the last of his cigarette.

His mind wandered, worrying about the herd, and hoping his crew were doing okay and hadn’t had any bother with the sheriff and his men. Then he thought about his girls, they’d be tucked up in their nice clean bedlinen now. Asleep in soft beds in a nice house on a nice street. Safe. He tried not to think how his life could have been. Tried not to think about working a ranch - his own bit of land, with the girls on their own ponies, Lizzy keeping house. A nice family, near a nice town. Church on Sundays in their best clothes.

Not here, on a cold hillside, with some kid who was stuck halfway between war and peacetime, who was trying to find those missing years when he should have been growing into a man but was rotting in a prison camp. Trying to find them by joining up with a group of men who had lost and were lost, some who looked to the past, some the future, some just taking one day - one hour, even, as it came, not wanting to think any further than that. A group thrown together each for their own reasons, taking on one of the toughest jobs a man could do because it was better than any alternative.

Somehow, even though they had only just met, he felt closer to Rowdy than some of the men he’d known for years. He wondered if it was the stubbornness - the same he’d had, when he went out to find work at fifteen, determined to prove to the world that he could make his own way, whatever was thrown at him.

He didn’t think he’d done too badly, all told. But he knew the way people looked at him, back East. As he was some feral creature, who should probably be kept out in the yard, and definitely not allowed on the furniture. Even when he was duded up, put on his best manners. As soon as
they found out he was a cowpoke, that was it. To them trail boss or greenest kid on drag, it didn’t make no odds. They were just saddletramps, and southerners at that.

Rowdy shifted in his sleep, muttering something, and looked like he was trying to burrow into the ground.

Gil pulled the blanket from around his own shoulders and tucked it around Rowdy. Then lit up another cigarette. He tucked his hands in his armpits as he smoked, trying to warm his fingers.

Rowdy looked up at the stars. The night was clear, the air crisp, but not too cold.

He knew the herd were around somewhere, but he couldn’t see the beeves. Just like he knew his horse was nearby, but somehow it didn’t matter where.

There was a noise behind him, and he didn’t need to look around to know who it was.

“Rowdy” a deep voice said, close by. A hand slid onto his bicep, hot breath flowed over his neck and ear. He shivered.

Another hand slid around his waist, under his vest, heading slowly for his belt buckle. He relaxed, leaning back slightly, allowing himself to be surrounded by the warmth of another human. The stars above him were bright, twinkling in the cool air. He let out a breath, and tipped his head back.

Lips dragged over his neck and ear. Soft, with the occasional hint of stubble. Not kissing, exactly, just there, exploring, tracing his jawline, breaths almost tickling.

There was a slight tightening of his belt as the buckle was pulled open, then the same for the buttons on his pants. He closed his eyes, giving in to the feelings.

Long fingers traced around his waistband, dipping inside to stroke over his skin, heading ever lower.

He felt as if his knees wouldn’t hold him up much longer, and reached back, somehow tangling his fingers into gun belt and pocket of the man behind him.

“Easy,” the voice said, and the first hand moved from his arm, snaking up under his untucked shirt and holding him steady, fingers splayed across his chest, thumb finding and rubbing over his nipple.

He groaned.

Finally the fingers which had been heading for his groin reached their target, and he gasped at the touch.

The hand that held his cock was cool, and somehow that just made it better as the fingers wrapped around his length and began stroking. He couldn’t help but push into the firm grip, tilting his hips, greedily getting what he wanted, panting as warmth felt like it was spreading through his body.

Gil looked down as Rowdy shifted in his sleep, obviously dreaming as he made a few small muttered noises, hair flopping about as he moved his head, pressing his cheek harder against Gil’s
thigh.

Rowdy felt like he needed more - more contact, more of everything, so he tried to struggle free of the arms which surrounded him, to turn and face the man, eager for his own hands to find and free buttons and buckles as he did so.

As Rowdy began to move more, try and roll over, Gil shook him gently.

“Hey, Rowdy - Rowdy!” Gil raised his voice slightly. “Easy there.”

Rowdy pushed against the solid chest, but he couldn’t make his fingers obey when he went to undo the buttons on the shirt. Somehow just couldn’t get a hold of them. And then there was a hand on his arm again. But this time it wasn’t stroking, it was shaking.

“Rowdy!”

His eyes flew open.

“Hey, easy now, you was jus’ havin’ a dream or somethin’,” Gil said softly.

Rowdy stared. He realised his pillow was shifting - his head wasn’t on his saddle. But on a warm, long leg, which he could now see in front of him, stretching out to where another crossed it at the ankle, familiar silver spur glinting at the heel of a well worn boot.

“Uh…” he struggled to move, the blankets conspiring against him to hold him down. “Sorry, I…” Then realised the angle he was staring from could only mean… he shoved himself to sit up, entangled in blankets and unable to do much but half roll over and prop himself on an elbow.

“Here,” Gil’s hands grabbed him around the biceps and sat him up, although he was still half-leaning against Gil’s arm for support.

“Um…” he managed. His heart felt like it might just beat its way out of his ribcage, and his pants were far too tight. He shook his head. There was absolutely no way that he, Rowdy Yates, had been dreaming about that.

He glanced across to Gil, who was smoothing down his pants leg where Rowdy’s head had been resting.

Rowdy hoped he hadn’t drooled. Although it seemed like that would be the least of his problems.

“Sun’ll be up soon,” Gil observed.

Rowdy just nodded. “I…uh, gotta just…go…” he stuttered, finally managing to disentangle himself from the blankets - he belatedly realised he had been wrapped in both of them.

“Sure,” Gil waved a vague hand in acknowledgement.

Rowdy stumbled over the loose rocks and clambered up the slope a bit, glad of the darkness.
Once he was fairly sure he was far enough away he stopped and listened for a long moment. There was no sound of movement, so he leant up against a boulder, quickly unbuckling his gun belt, dragging his chaps down just far enough and undoing his pants.

He slid his hand inside, wishing it felt as good as his dream had, and squeezed himself gently, before closing his fist and setting up a steady rhythm. He knew he couldn’t be too long, so closed his eyes, trying desperately to conjure up the rest of the fantasy. His other hand wandered over his shirt front, stroking the soft material, rubbing over his chest. He tried not to think of Joe, in a similar position - pushed back against the rocks by Quince’s smaller frame. Joe’s eyes had been closed, pants around his thighs. Quince’s hat had been in the dirt, and Rowdy was sure it had fallen there, probably in their rush to get on with it, and get back to camp before they were missed.

All he could imagine was that same pose - but with a tall, lean body pressing against him, holding him, surrounding him.

He came, hot and slick over his fingers, he panted into the crook of his arm, biting down on his shirtsleeve. Then he tipped his head back, trying to get his breath back, wiping his hand on the rock beside him and wishing they had some water.

Finally he took a piss, wiped his hand a bit more on a few leaves, and turned to head back to Gil, noticing the sky to the east slowly getting brighter.

He tried not to think about the dream, although he couldn’t help but stop and look at Gil in the pale morning light. Leaning back against the boulder, smoking again, one leg stretched out in front of him, the other bent at the knee, hand holding the cigarette resting on it. Rowdy supposed he was quite handsome. There wasn’t anything wrong with him, anyway. Except that he didn’t smile often. Rowdy had noticed that much in the short time they’d known each other.

“I ate all your jerky,” he said as an apologetic greeting as he walked back to their little makeshift camp and sat down again.

Gil looked at him and gave a small smile. “Seemed like you needed it.”

“Didn’t you?” Rowdy pushed.

Gil shrugged. “I’ll survive.”

“Must’ve…guess you didn’t get that much either, when you was fightin’? Food, I mean?” He asked. He knew supplies in the war had been limited, especially, he guessed, near the end.

Gil shifted, drawing his knees up. “Sometimes.”

“I didn’t…I mean, we fought, but…then we got captured. An’…well, felt like it was all over an’ I hadn’t really done anything,” Rowdy picked a strand of grass which was clinging to life in some mud that had gathered by the boulder they rested back against.

Gil just shook his head, and Rowdy wished he knew what the other man was thinking. Sometimes he wanted to talk about it all. Make sense of it. Others he never wanted to think about it again in his life. He wondered if he’d have felt the same if he’d been fighting. Or if they’d won.

“C’mon, we should move,” Gil stood stiffly. “Need to hit town an’ find the marshal soon as we can.”
They rode on, still keeping an eye on the rough track which led to the next town, but keeping far enough away from it that they’d spot the dust of anyone coming. The telegraph lines ran along it, so even when they moved further away they could usually see the tops of the poles.

A couple of times they stopped near trees or the rocky slope as a rider passed by. No one seemed to spot them - or if they did, paid them no mind.

They saw the town mid-morning, and Rowdy smiled. “I know you wanna go an’ find the marhsal, but…can we at least get some food? Maybe there’s a restaurant?”

Gil smiled. “Sure. Ain’t like I don’t want to eat. Some kid ate all my jerky.”

Rowdy felt himself flush slightly. “I…” he began.

Gil waved a hand, dismissing whatever he was going to say. “’S okay. Wouldn’t’ve give it t’you if wanted it.”
The town was busy - and bigger than Saxon. Wagons and horses lined the streets and people walked all over, going about their business.

“There,” Gil pointed.

Rowdy’s face lit up as he saw the sign painted on the building ‘Proud Hollow Restaurant- Good Food Served Here’, he nodded. “Let’s go!”

They hitched their horses up and went inside - it was busy, but there were a few tables free, so Rowdy sat down, hanging his hat from his chair. A pretty young girl came up to them, holding a small pad and a pencil.

“Mornin’, err, Miss,” Rowdy smiled. “Can I have the biggest plate of breakfast you got? At least two of everythin’?”

The girl smiled. “Of course, Sir.”

“Coffee,” Gil ordered, smiling up at the girl. “An’ keep it comin’. With some…bacon, eggs, biscuits…whatever you got.”

She nodded. “Comin’ right up.”

Gil watched as Rowdy’s gaze followed her across the room. He shook his head a little.

“Don’t you have a girl at home?” He asked. “I mean…you ain’t so bad lookin’, for a cowhand.”

Rowdy dragged his gaze back to Gil. “What? Oh, no, well…no, not really. I mean, it ain’t the same, when you grown up together, is it? ‘Sides…most of ‘em are married now. The good ones.”

Gil nodded, leaning back in his chair. The second the mug of coffee the girl brought over hit the table his hand moved toward it. He took a long drink. It was too hot, not bitter enough, but he could feel it flowing into his veins as if it was giving him life. He closed his eyes for a moment.

When he opened them Rowdy was staring at him.

“What?” He asked, not too unkindly.

Rowdy blew on his own coffee and shook his head.

“What?” He insisted.

“I jus’…you don’t seem to give much clue as to what you’re thinkin’, mostly,” Rowdy stared into his cup. “But when you drank that coffee for a minute you…looked like it were your best friend.”

Gil smiled, looking into the dark liquid. “Jus’ like coffee is all.”

Rowdy couldn’t help but smile too. He felt as if they’d come a very long way from being tied up on the floor of a stinking barn.

The breakfast arrived quickly, and they both began eating, Rowdy with his usual speed.

“You know, boy, ain’t no one gonna come an’ take it away from you,” Gil observed, as Rowdy
leant so far toward the plate there was barely a gap between his chin and the food.

Rowdy looked up at him. “S good though,” he said, with his mouth full.

They ate in silence - and in truth, Gil was hungry too, but was content to keep a more leisurely pace, stopping to drink down coffee, and nodding his gratitude when the serving girl did as he’d asked, and kept his mug topped up. Not having coffee made him feel the same as running out of tobacco - the thought of it would just be there, all the time, nagging in his mind. He’d been thinking about this cup since mid way through the day before.

He kept his gaze on the door, mostly, occasionally glancing at the other patrons, too, and then back to Rowdy, who had virtually finished the huge plate of food. Gil wondered idly where it all went. It didn’t look like it’d fit inside Rowdy’s skinny frame.

The door opened, and he glanced up, then tensed.

“Rowdy.”

There was something in his tone that made Rowdy look up, then around, following his gaze.

A marshal and two deputies had entered, and were looking straight at them.

Gil sat back, picked up his coffee and cradled it in his hands. Rowdy ate faster.

Gil nodded to the marshal as he approached, careful to keep both his hands wrapped around the mug, in plain sight.

“Mister,” the marshal glanced at Rowdy, then looked back to Gil.

“Marshal. Was jus’ comin’ to find you.”

The man rocked back on his heels and tucked his thumbs into his belt. “Were you now? Just stopped off here first?”

Gil nodded, smiling. “S right. Got mighty hungry out there on the road. Me an’ my friend here’d like to report a crime.”

The marshal frowned. “Need to take your guns, Mister.”

Gil nodded and shifted slightly, so his holster was clear of the chair.

“Rowdy, give the man your gun. Oh, ‘cept, they ain’t ours, Marshal…”

“Brady’s the name,” the marshal answered.

“Well, they ain’t ours. We borrowed ‘em.”

The marshal pulled the gun from Gil’s holster, and picked Rowdy’s up from the table top, passing them back to one of his deputies. “Borrowed ‘em?”

Gil nodded. “Figured their owners wouldn’t mind, it was jus’ for a few hours. I’m sure you’ll see they get ‘em back. An’…while you’re at it, ours was stolen.”

“Get on your feet, you’re comin’ with us,” the marshal pulled his own gun.
Gil drained his coffee, keeping his hands away from his body as he put the empty mug on the table. “Mind if I ask what the charge is?” He asked, calmly.

“Bank robbery.” The marshal gestured with his gun. “Come on.”

“Can I pay the lady first?” Gil gestured to the girl who’d served them, trying to ignore the wide-eyed stare Rowdy was giving him. “Don’t wanna be caught up on a charge of runnin’ out on our bill too.”

The jail wasn’t large - an office with cells in behind it, one of which was occupied by someone who was snoring loudly on the hard shelf that served as a bed.

“So, mind if I ask us what we’re supposed to have done?” Gil asked as they stepped inside.

“You know what you done. Got word on the telegraph this mornin’. You robbed the bank in Saxon.”

Gil put his hands on his hips. “We didn’t.”

Rowdy glanced from Gil to the marshal and back. “He…we didn’t, he’s tellin’ the truth,” he said, although he wasn’t sure why.

“Not what we were told.” The marshal gestured to his men.

One of the deputies opened the door to the empty cell.

“An’ who told you, Marshal?” Gil asked.

“Sheriff out in Saxon. Get in that cell.”

Gil took a step toward it, and Rowdy wasn’t sure what he should do - wanting to help, but knowing that with three guns on them they didn’t have a hope of getting away. He sighed and walked inside, but stayed standing, in case he needed to do something.

“Sheriff, huh?” Gil took another step, then turned. “How’d he know there’d been a robbery?”

The marshal frowned. “What d’you mean?”

Gil shrugged. “Banker out in Saxon’s dead they say. New one ain’t in town yet. How’d the sheriff know there’d been a robbery?” He stepped into the cell, turning and staring the marshal down through the bars as the door was closed and locked.

“Say, Marshal - you will look after our animals, won’t you? I mean, I imagine you want to check we di’nt jus’ leave all that money in our saddlebags anyhow?” Gil asked, resting his forearms through the bars on the cell door.

There was some muttering between the marshal and his deputies in the office. Then they split up. One sat, watching over the prisoners, shotgun cradled in his hands. The others left the jailhouse.

Gil turned and sat heavily on the bed. Rowdy looked around, scratching his cheek, then smoothed down the front of his shirt. “So…uh…”

“We wait,” Gil said.
Rowdy sat next to him. “You…don’t seem too worried?”

Gil shrugged. “He’ll find out we ain’t done nothin’ soon enough.”

Rowdy nodded slowly. “We ain’t?”

“We ain’t.” Gil scooted back into the corner and pulled his legs up, then began to roll a cigarette.

Rowdy stared out of the cell, then ran his hand through his hair. “So…uh….”

Gil struck a match with his thumbnail, flicking it aside once his cigarette was lit and looked at Rowdy. “So?” He said, in a cloud of smoke.

“Well…what now?” Rowdy asked.

“Ain’t you never been in jail ‘fore?” Gil frowned.

Rowdy frowned right back at him. “Me? No. Why would I? Have you?”

Gil shrugged. “Get used to it. Folk don’t like cowpunchers. Any trouble when you’re in town, like as not you’ll end up in a cell for it. Usually get out pretty quick.”

“Really?” Rowdy pulled a face. He was bored already, and they’d only been there five minutes. It reminded him far too much of where he’d been held prisoner in the war - although the surroundings were far nicer.

“Can I have one?” He gestured to Gil’s cigarette.

Gil nodded and passed over his bag of tobacco and papers.

Rowdy carefully pulled out a paper and balanced it on his fingertips, as he’d seen Gil do. He poured a little tobacco into the crease of the paper, then tried very hard not to spill it as he vaguely waved the pouch back at Gil, hoping he’d take it.

Once Gil had rescued the bag, Rowdy carefully tried to arrange the tobacco and roll the cigarette, touching the tip of his tongue along the paper.

As soon as he let go to turn the cigarette around and place it between his lips the whole thing came apart and he was left with paper stuck to one finger and a lap full of shredded tobacco. He frowned.

There was a small sigh from beside him. Gil pulled out a new paper, quickly loading it, licking it and rolling it all using only one hand, then he passed it to Rowdy and offered him a match.

Rowdy frowned even more. He reached over to the wall and struck the match, inhaling as the flame touched the end of the thin tube.

Then he coughed, tried to take a breath, and coughed again.

Gil just looked at him, eyebrows raised.

“Jus’…” Rowdy coughed again, and leant back against the wall as his head swam a little.

“Ain’t a habit you need,” Gil observed. “Jus’ costs you money when you got makin’s an’ drives you mad when you don’t.”

Rowdy tried another inhale - more gently, this time. But the effect was the same, feeling as if he’d
been punched in the ribs, robbed of his breath, and just an overwhelming need to expel the bitter smoke. His mouth tingled and burned.

He wheezed and coughed and almost doubled over as his lungs tried to empty.

Warm fingers removed the cigarette from his grasp, and he tried to ignore Gil smoking it, completely serenely, as if it was a sweet breath of fresh air.

Rowdy spat out a shred of tobacco, and rubbed his tongue over his teeth, feeling as if his mouth was somehow coated in the acrid smoke.

The marshal finally returned, and walked up to the bars of the cell.

“So where is it?”

Gil flicked the cigarette end away into the corner. “What?”

“The money!”

“What’d he say?” Gil slowly sat up straight and stretched.

“What? He didn’t need to say anything! They got a bank robbery, say you did it.”

“So where is the money?” Gil asked, in a flat tone.

The marshal looked like he was tempted to shoot Gil, Rowdy thought. He supposed he should get up, but his head was still spinning a little.

“You must’ve hid it someplace.”

“Maybe you’d like to ride out with us,” Gil offered.

“Ride out where - to get ambushed by some of your gang?”

Gil stood, walking slowly to the bars, and leant against them. Rowdy stood too, feeling like he should back Gil up.

“Got a gang now, do I?” Gil asked. “Sheriff tell you that ’n all?”

“Say, Mister,” Rowdy interjected. “What did he say, about how comes he knows there was a robbery?”

The marshal looked uncomfortable.

“How about we sit down and talk this out?” Gil offered. “I think maybe you’ll want to hear what we got to say ‘bout this robbery.”

The marshal looked unsure.

“Look, all I’m askin’ is to explain. ‘Cause right now, I don’t reckon they got anythin’ but a dislike of drovers an’ are real riled up that we ruined their plan. Think about it, why’d we come in here? I got a herd, supplies, twenty men, a coupla hours ride from here. I’d’ve gone back to them from Saxon if I’d wanted. Not rode in here an’ sat down waitin’ on you.”
Half an hour later they were both back in their saddles, now each with handcuffs on. One of the deputies accompanied them and the marshal. The other had been dispatched to ride out as fast as he could, and meet them back in Saxon once he had accomplished his task.

“Not just hold on a God damn second,” Wishbone protested, as he was shoved into the jail cell.

“Wish, Wish,” Pete held his hands up. “Ain’t gonna do Mister Favor no good actin’ like that.”

Wishbone fixed him with a glare. “Ain’t gonna do him no good stuck here neither, Pete.” He spat the name like an insult.

“Like I told you, he’s in jail up in Proud Hollow, an’ now we got you two you can go up there too - stand trial together,” the sheriff nodded.

“Trial?” Wishbone almost shouted. “Why you…we ain’t done a darned thing and you know it.”

“Tell us where the money is,” the sheriff said.

“Now hold on,” Pete said, trying to keep calm. “We don’t know nothing about no money. We just know our trail boss and our ramrod come into town for supplies, an’ now they’ve gone missin’.”

“Supplies, huh? That what you callin’ robbin’ banks these days?”

Pete blinked. “Now just you wait, Mister, we ain’t robbed no…” Pete began.

“Robbed a bank?” Wishbone’s voice went higher with indignation. “We ain’t even seen a bank in over a month.”

“Marshal from up in Proud Hollow thinks different,” the sheriff said. “We’ve sent word that we’ve got you now. Daresay he’ll send a few men for you.”

“Well I can tell you Mister Favor would never do no such thing,” Wishbone said, folding his arms across his chest. “He’s a law abidin’ citizen.”

Pete just sighed. “When’ll they get here?” He asked.

“I don’t know, you just wait an’ be quiet,” the sheriff said, turning away.

“Oh, well, this was just a great idea Pete Nolan,” Wishbone huffed, turning on the scout. “Just go into town an’ see if we can find ‘em, well you done a mighty fine job of findin’ them, haven’t you?”

“Wish…” Pete stoped, shook his head and sat on the bed. “I ain’t arguin’ with you. Seems we got trouble enough without findin’ it with each other too.”

Rowdy fiddled with the iron handcuffs, moving them around his wrists. They were rubbing at his skin and irritating him.

“Okay?” Gil asked in a low voice.
“Huh? Yeah. Just wish we didn’t have to wear these.” Rowdy frowned.

Gil nodded. “Well, jus’…sit tight. Be out of this soon.”

Rowdy nodded, and returned to looking glum and worrying at the cuffs.

They finally reached town, and Rowdy couldn’t help but look at the bank as they went past. He noticed that Gil was staring impassively ahead, and tried to do the same.

The sheriff was sitting outside the jail, and rose to his feet at their approach.

“Marshal Brady. Wasn’t expectin’ you to come for yourself,” the sheriff called.

“Mister Dawson. Thought we’d all come on over. See what happened.” Brady dismounted and stretched, then gestured to Gil and Rowdy. “Get down, you two.”

Rowdy felt like everyone was watching them in the street, and kept his head down, staying close to his horse, until he realised Gil was standing easy, head high, meeting the gaze of anyone staring.

“See you got ‘em then,” Dawson gestured to Gil. “He’s the one - the leader. Got a couple more of his gang in here now, too. Rounded ‘em up this mornin’.”

Rowdy saw Gil tense at that. “You got more of my men - my trail hands? You realise we’re pushin’ a herd, do you? If I lose a single head ‘cause of…”

The marshal held his hand up to stop Gil’s advance on the sheriff.

“Why’d you pick ‘em up, Dawson?” He asked.

The sheriff looked a little awkward. “Well…to tell truth, they come in, lookin’ for these two. So I put ‘em in the cell. I sent word to you…must’ve missed you though.”

Brady nodded slowly. “Maybe bring ‘em out. Boys can watch ‘em all.”

A minute later Wishbone and Pete appeared.


Gil looked at him, expression blank. “Thought I told you to stay with the herd.”

Pete gestured at Wishbone. “Wish was worried ‘bout you two. Figured we should come an’ check.”

Wishbone’s head snapped round at the mention of his name. “Pete here put Joe an’ Jim in charge of the herd.”

Gil held his still-shackled hands up. “All I care about is the herd’s in good hands an’ you two ain’t done somethin’ stupid to get yourselves locked up.”

“You mean like rob a bank?” Pete asked, innocently.

The marshals glanced around at Gil, who just shrugged and stared straight back at him.

Dawson sniffed. “Well, see, these two showed up in town yesterday. I didn’t like the look of ‘em. Had some story ‘bout finding a body, out near Rileyville. Now, see, we knowed there’s a man missin’, gone out that way. So when we got word from Dick Burnett over in Rileyville that a body’d been found, we figured it might be him. I thought maybe these two had killed him.”

Gil gave a slight snort and shook his head, still smiling. Rowdy shifted nervously.

“Then this mornin’, we see the bank’s been robbed, see?”

Gil held up his hands. “How?”

Dawson looked at him. “How what?”

Gil shrugged. “How’d you see the bank’d been robbed.”

A silence stretched, and Rowdy began to smile.

“Come on, answer the man,” Brady waved at Gil.

“We…uh, we seen there was…they’d got in,” Dawson stuttered.

“Where?” Gil asked.

Brady looked from Gil to Dawson, then shifted from where he’d rested one foot on the steps of the jail. “Come on, spit it out.”

“It…they come in through the roof,” Marty said.

“Show me,” Brady ordered.

Everyone walked around the end of the block. Pete reached out and tipped Rowdy’s hat over his eyes, causing Rowdy to spin around, shoving Pete away. Then Wishbone gave them both a look which stopped any sort of further mischief. Gil walked beside the marshal, long legs and easy stride giving him a look of complete relaxation, particularly in relation to Dawson, who had to hustle along, being far shorter and stouter.

Rowdy smiled even more widely when he realised the place they had pulled the shingles off was barely detectable from the street.

“See up there,” Dawson gestured.

Brady pushed his hat back on his head. “Nope.”

“Well…it’s there all right, you get up and have a look, they’re loose.”

“An’ did you?” Gil asked.

“Did we what?”

“Get up an’ have a look at a roof that looks jus’ fine to me.”

Brady turned and gave Gil a long look.
“Did you?” He asked Dawson.

“We got up inside,” Dawson answered. “You can see it in there - there’s light comin’ through.”

“Show me inside.”

They all trooped back around, and the sheriff opened the door to the bank, which was unlocked.

“How’d you get in?” Gil asked.

Dawson looked at him, eyes wide.

“Think you better just tell us what’s goin’ on,” Brady sighed, looking at Dawson.

Rowdy smiled, and glanced at Gil, who had an expression of studious interest on his face.

“Well, we…uh, seen…you know, and come in here, and…well, the money had gone, so…”

“How’d you know the money’s gone?” Rowdy grinned.

“It…ain’t in the safe no more,” Dawson answered.

“And how’d you get in the safe?” Rowdy pushed.

“We…it was open.”

Rowdy swallowed, frowning. He hadn’t expected that as an answer.

A noise made them turn, and the deputy who had ridden out of Proud Hollow before them stepped into the bank, dusty and sweaty, obviously having ridden hard. He just nodded at Brady, then stood by the door.

Brady turned to look at Dawson.

“My man here just rid all the way up to near Rileyville. Says there’s a grave been dug up there, body rifled through.”

Dawson’s eyes widened, and he glanced toward the doorway, which was now blocked by both the deputies.

“An’ Mister Favor here tells me the safe was locked, last night. And you know, I ain’t got reason to disbelieve him. Seems everything else he’s said is the truth.”

Pete blew out a breath from somewhere behind them, and Wishbone shifted, glaring at Dawson.

“So, one last thing to check,” Brady gestured to Gil. “If you don’t mind?”

“Sure.” Gil led the way to the office, and pulled a desk away from the wall, revealing there were some drawers just under the desktop, which had been hidden when the desk was turned around against the wall. “Marshal?” Gil gestured to them. The marshal nodded, so Gil pulled one of the drawers open to reveal neatly stacked piles of ten dollar bills.

The marshal moved to check the other drawers, and Gil stepped out of the way.

Rowdy turned to smile at him. Then he saw a sudden movement out of the corner of his eye. “Boss!” was all he got out as he launched himself at Gil.
The gunshot was deafening in the small room, and was immediately followed by more shots as the deputies acted.

Rowdy landed heavily, half on top of Gil, and winced at the stinging pain in his forearm. His fingers felt numb. He rolled off Gil onto the floor, blood oozing between his fingers as he grabbed his arm. A cry and thump nearby told him someone else had also been hit.

“Rowdy?” Gil was leaning over him in an instant.

“I’m fine,” Rowdy sat up as Wishbone dropped to his knees beside them.

“You okay boy?” Wishbone pulled his hand away.

“I’m okay, Wish,” Rowdy hissed as Wishbone pulled his blood soaked shirtsleeve away from the wound.

“What d’you mean by…” Wishbone began, turning to Gil. “Boss?”

Rowdy glanced up at the concerned tone of Wishbone’s voice.

“Hey you, get those irons off ‘em,” Pete grabbed hold of one of the deputies and pointed at Gil and Rowdy.

The marshal glanced down at the body of the sheriff which lay at his feet, then nodded slowly.

“Mister Favor?” Wishbone took advantage of Gil being distracted by Pete to grab hold of his vest and pull it aside.

Rowdy could see a growing dark stain on the dirty blue fabric. He thought he’d done enough to push Gil out of the way when the sheriff had pulled his gun, but now he felt sick at the sight of the blood - he knew how easily and painfully a man could die of being gut shot.

“It ain’t nothin’ Wish,” Gil swatted Wishbone’s hands away. “See to Rowdy.”

Wishbone once again looked fit to burst, and grabbed the keys for the handcuffs from the Marshal. “Give me them,” he snapped, fumbling around with the bunch and grabbing Rowdy’s hands to free him.

There was a doctor in town, so Wishbone reluctantly allowed the man to check on Rowdy and Gil, hovering about the man’s elbow as he did so.

Gil had a long gouge across one side of his abdomen, which showed that Rowdy’s shout and shove had saved him from a potentially lethal wound. Rowdy’s arm had a deeper, shorter wound, from the same bullet.

Before Gil even had a bandage wrapped around his midriff he was already ordering Pete to push the herd on and Wishbone to rescue the supplies they had bought and get back to feed the crew.

Neither of them wanted to leave, but Rowdy saw the stony expression on Gil’s face, and knew they’d both obey. He almost thought he should offer to get back himself.

By the time the doctor had finished with them both, and Gil had paid him, the town had almost
gone back to normal. There were still groups of people around, chattering about the action the town
had seen, and their now-dead sheriff, but beyond that, it would seem like any normal day.

Gil glanced at Rowdy as they walked out into the sunshine.

“Missed lunch,” he observed.

Rowdy nodded slowly.

“You must be sicker ‘n I thought. Want to go back in?” Gil gestured back at the doctor’s office.

“I just…thought you was hurt bad, back there, that’s all.” He looked at the mud-caked boardwalk,
listened to the slow steady clink of Gil’s spurs as they walked. Like a heartbeat. Steady, reliable,
strong.

“C’mon, could do with a drink ‘fore we ride back,” Gil steered him toward the saloon.

Two large drinks appeared on the bar in front of them.

“On me,” the barman said. “We all got money in that bank. We’re obliged to you both.”

Gil picked up the glass and tipped it to the man. Rowdy just took a swallow, welcoming the burn.

He knew Gil kept glancing at him, but he didn’t want to talk, not in the middle of the saloon.

“C’mon,” Gil finally said, finishing his drink and sliding his glass back toward the barman.

Rowdy took a last gulp of the whiskey and nodded.

The rode out of the town in silence. Rowdy stroked his fingers over the bandage around his arm. It
didn’t feel so bad now. He glanced at the bloodstain on Gil’s shirt. Somehow it seemed like that
hurt worse.

“Thank you,” Gil suddenly said.

“Huh?” Rowdy was dragged from his thoughts.

“Saved my life. Figure that’s worth some thanks.”

Rowdy gave a small smile. “Didn’t…figure he’d do that.”

“‘Cause he’s a sheriff?” Gil asked.

Rowdy shrugged. “‘Cause everyone else was there, more. But…yeah.”

“Didn’t figure he’d do it either. Guess he was jus’ desperate.”

The sun was rapidly dipping in the sky, and the only sound came from their horses, the swish of
hooves through the grass, an occasional huff or snort.

“You okay?” Gil finally asked.
Rowdy looked around at him quickly, then fixed his gaze back on the prairie in front of them.

“Just…thought maybe you’d been gut shot back there. Thought…you know…” He looked away, not wanting to meet Gil’s steady gaze. “Just figured I’d…found someplace. An’ if you’d…”

“Hey,” Gil reached out and squeezed Rowdy’s bicep. “You have found someplace. I got a good crew - the best, an’ you’re fittin’ right in with ‘em.”

Rowdy gave a small smile at that. Another compliment, if you squinted.
They came to a shallow running stream just as the setting sun turned the clouds above bright pink against the deepening blue of the sky.

Gil dismounted stiffly, trying not to stretch out the wound on his belly.

He let his horse drink, then scooped up a little water for himself.

Rowdy stood, loosely holding his horse’s reins as it sniffed around some of the lush grass by the stream, and looked up at the sky.

“ kinda pretty, ain’t it,” he said.

Gil straightened up and moved to stand beside him. “Sure is.”

Rowdy glanced away from the sky only to see the colours reflected in the water at their feet. He took a deep breath, enjoying the quiet. Then finally asked a question that had been burning inside him all day.

“You ever… had somethin’ like Quince an’ Scarlet?”

Gil wiped his sleeve across his mouth slowly.

“Not like they got, no.”

Rowdy nodded slowly, not quite sure of what to make of that answer. He still wasn’t entirely sure what they did have. But it wasn’t a plain ‘no’, either.

“I can see… how it does get kinda lonely,” he said, carefully.

Gil tucked his thumbs into his belt, still staring up at the clouds. “You lonely?” He asked softly.

Rowdy took a sharp breath in. But he didn’t know what to say. In the end he just nodded, not daring to look at Gil.

He felt as if time stretched and warped around them. The reflection of the clouds shimmered as the water shifted and eddied over the pebbles. Somehow it felt as if all his senses became a little more alert - he could smell the fresh grass, hear the contended chewing from his horse.

A hand slid around his back, slipping under his vest, resting on the soft area between ribcage and hip. Then Gil moved, stepping around slightly to face him, giving a gentle pull to urge him closer.

He dropped the reins he was still holding.

He shifted his weight, swaying into Gil, not knowing where to put his hands or what to do, other than stand close, and be held.

Gil’s touch was light. Tentative. Rowdy knew he could easily break away, if he wanted. Instead he slowly brought his hand up, resting it on Gil’s shirt front, hiding the bloodstain and ripped hole from view. His fingers traced a button.

“Hey.”
Rowdy didn’t look up.

“Hey,” Gil said, a little more forcefully. “’S okay. Folk get lonely.”

“It ain’t…” he struggled for the word. “Right,” he finally settled on.

Gil’s hand left his back, and waved to the empty grassland. “Ain’t no one here to say what’s wrong or right ‘cept you an’ me.”

Rowdy breathed in deeply. The buckle on his gun belt slid over Gil’s, catching slightly as it did so.

He finally looked up. Gil wasn’t smiling. He looked serious. Sad, almost.

“You were married,” he said softly.

“I ain’t no more,” Gil replied.

It sounded emotionless. Rowdy didn’t know what he’d expected. it suddenly felt like a stupid thing to have said.

Gil’s hands slid into the back pockets of Rowdy’s pants, pulling him closer.

The brim of their hats hit, and Rowdy glanced down at Gil’s lips, then back up to his eyes. They seemed dark in the failing light.

And then Gil’s lips were brushing his. Barely touching. Just breathing the same air.

Rowdy shoved his hat back off his head, letting the stampede strings catch it, and rested his forehead on Gil’s. He’d never been with someone anywhere near as tall as he was. He was used to leaning down to kiss girls. He shifted his hands over Gil’s chest, sliding inside his vest, not knowing what to do. If Gil had been a girl…he smiled a little to himself.

“What?” Gil was smiling too, and Rowdy relaxed a little.

“Nothin’, I was…thinkin’.” He glanced up. “If you was a pretty girl I’d know what to do.”

“It ain’t no different. Just…don’t forget I ain’t, or you’ll be mighty shocked.”

Rowdy giggled at that, and Gil kissed him again. Dry, gentle. A hint of stubble, catching against his own, scraping a little over sensitive lips.

He slid his hands lower, mapping out the layers of leather at Gil’s waist - gun belt, chaps, regular belt. Solid and strong and nothing like any of them women he’d ever been with. No ruffles or adornment. Then tugged on the material of the shirt, pulling it free, dipping his fingers inside. Warm skin, soft hairs…and the soft edge of the bandage.

He traced around the material, then forced himself to ignore it, and focus instead on Gil’s hands cupping his butt, pulling him closer, forcing their hips together.

Rowdy slid his arms around Gil’s waist, trying to keep his balance.

Gil broke away from kissing Rowdy and glanced around them.

“C’mon,” he steered Rowdy to a patch of grass slightly further from the water, leaving the horses ground tied.
Before he sat Gil stripped off his gun belt and chaps, movement sure and economical.

Rowdy felt his mouth go a little dry. He dropped his gun belt too, and threw his hat down, then looked down to where Gil had stretched out in the grass, propped up on one elbow, legs crossed at the ankles. He seemed completely relaxed. A comma of dark hair was falling over his forehead.

Rowdy’s heart beat a little faster. He sat, then mirrored Gil’s pose, almost close enough to touch, and picked at the grass, wondering how many times Gil had done this, and with who.

Gil reached over, grabbing a handful of Rowdy’s vest, and rolled onto his back, dragging Rowdy on top of him.

Rowdy was caught by surprise - but went with the movement, his leg ending up between Gil’s, one elbow resting in the dirt, the other on Gil’s chest.

He was pulled in for another kiss, and this time returned it a little more enthusiastically. Somehow he felt more comfortable - glad that he was on top, even though Gil seemed to be taking the lead. He edged his free hand downward, bumping over the buttons of Gil’s shirt, hitting his belt, then going lower, feeling a very obvious hardness. He squeezed gently, trying to imagine what he’d like being done to him, and felt a small victory as he felt Gil moan a little, the sound muffled and lost in their kiss.

A smile tugged at his lips. He squeezed again, enjoying the reaction, the jolt it sent through them both. Then Gil’s thigh lifted between his own legs and couldn’t help but rub against it, the movement sending a shiver through him.

Gil’s hands rubbed up over his back, inside his vest at first, then dragging his shirt out of his pants and sliding over naked flesh. There was a strength in the hold that made him feel secure - feel wanted. He panted a little as one of the hands slid down to his butt and squeezed, encouraging him to move, but the friction he could get served to raise the tension rather than give any relief.

Then the hand slid to cover his own - encouraging him to rub over Gil’s hardness. And he felt the soft leather of Gil’s belt slide past his wrist, the give in the fabric as each button of the fly opened. His hand was guided inside - the warm material of Gil’s long johns was soft under his hand, and contrasted with the hard flesh beneath. He felt Gil’s breath hitch as he stroked, and did it again just to feel the slight tremor in Gil’s legs and swallow down the small needy noise he made with another kiss.

Gil’s hands moved on, sliding between them, tugging at Rowdy’s belt.

Rowdy realised he was being watched - dark grey eyes holding his gaze, as if asking permission.

He just smiled and lifted his hips a little, then removed his hand from Gil for a moment to undo the buckle at the back of his own chaps, before settling again, hand reaching down to caress soft balls, noticing that Gil’s legs slid a little wider apart.

Gil smiled in return, pulling Rowdy’s pants open and pushing his hand inside. Rowdy felt fingers wrap around his length and he closed his eyes for a second. It was a hundred times better than his dream.

“Here,” Gil rolled them both onto their sides, legs still entangled, and shifted to line them up a little better, then shoved Rowdy’s pants further down. The fingers of his left hand tangled in Rowdy’s dusty hair, pulling him in for another kiss. His right closed around their cocks, holding them together and moving gently.
Rowdy moaned, bucking his hips slightly, pulling Gil in to a tighter embrace.

Gil paused for a second, brought his hand up and spat into his palm before continuing with his task.

Rowdy knew he wasn’t going to last long. He braced himself, one of Gil’s spurs was digging into the back of his calf, but he didn’t care - he just needed to get as close as possible, to use any leverage he could get to thrust into Gil’s hand, feeling the slide of skin and the thrill of being touched by someone else.

He came hard, his moans of pleasure muffled against Gil’s mouth, until he pulled away a little, panting, feeling Gil’s hand slipping through the mess he’d made, slick and warm until it felt like every muscle in Gil’s body tensed, flexing with his release. Then Gil rolled away from him, over onto his back again, as if the strength had been drained from him. Rowdy followed the movement, keeping a loose embrace. He rested his chin on Gil’s shoulder.

They lay together, panting, breathing synchronising then falling out of step again. Rowdy could smell the crushed grass they lay on, and something slightly more fragrant.

“You smell nice,” he murmured.

He felt more than saw the look Gil gave him.

He grinned, dragging his hand up from the wet mess they’d made of each other, over the fresh bandaging and under Gil’s shirt, tracing fingertips through the soft hair on his chest, then finding and exploring a nipple.

“You do.”

“Told you t’remember I ain’t a pretty girl,” Gil answered, but his grip on Rowdy’s waist tightened slightly, reassuringly.

Rowdy felt weak, and tired. He moved a little, to get his belt buckle out from under his hip.

“’S your hair,” he said, sniffing again as he moved. Then he rested his cheek down on Gil’s solid chest.

“Gotta get back to the herd,” Gil said, although Rowdy could really only hear the deep rumble under his ear.

“Mmm,” he said, noncommittally, closing his eyes.

“C’mon.” Gil pushed him away. “Last thing we need is them sendin’ a search party out an’ findin’ us like this.”

That was enough to make Rowdy move. He lay on his back, feeling distinctly sticky, and glanced around in the gloom.

Gil stood, holding his pants up with one hand, tugging his bandana from around his neck with the other. Rowdy watched as he made an attempt to clean himself up, then wandered down to the stream to rinse the cloth and have a slightly better wash. He was pleased to see Gil didn’t exactly look steady on his feet either.
Once they’d put themselves back together, bandanas back around their necks, damp shirt fronts tucked back into their pants, they mounted up, Gil lighting a cheroot.

Rowdy couldn’t help but grin to himself.

“Better wipe that grin offa your face,” Gil said.

Rowdy frowned. “Why?”

“’Cause man who’s been arrested an’ shot up ain’t got right to look so happy,” Gil answered, but Rowdy could hear the smile in his voice.

When they got back to the camp they were greeted warmly by everyone, even Wishbone, who made Mushy get them both coffee, and doled out two plates of stew and biscuits.

“That doctor fix you up?” he asked them both.

Gil nodded. “Sure he di’n’t do as good a job as you, what with all your trainin’, Wish, but we lived.”

Rowdy felt a little jolt at that, as if something squeezed his heart.

Wishbone made an unhappy growl. “Made doughnuts. But I can feed ‘em all to the coyotes if you’re gonna be smart.”

“So,” Pete dragged a crate over to them. “That sheriff think he could jus’ take the money outta the bank?”

Gil nodded, chewing. “Seems like he figured bein’ lawman could earn him more’n he had right to.”

“So who was that jasper you found?” Wishbone hovered around them, dumping another spoonful of stew onto Rowdy’s plate as soon as there was space.

“Banker’s brother. Seems like he was tryin’ to get to Rileyville. Reckon he got shot, went over that bluff in the night. Probably come off his horse an’ was wanderin’ ‘bout in the dark.”

Wishbone shook his head. “Who can you trust if you can’t trust the law?”

Rowdy grinned up at him. “Seems like a trail boss is pretty trustworthy,” he gestured to Gil.

“Aaahhh, don’t you believe a word of it,” Wishbone said, grumpily. “You wait ’til you see him around candy. I ain’t never seen no one so light fingered. Can’t believe no one in town he grew up in ever made a livin’ sellin’ candy with him around.”

Rowdy laughed at the look of complete shocked innocence on Gil’s face.

“Know someone who won’t be makin’ a livin’ as a trail cook if he can’t hold his tongue,” Gil groused.

Wishbone sloshed more coffee in Gil’s cup, a good amount missing and running over Gil’s chaps where the mug rested on his knee. “You call this a livin’?” he grumbled. “You got mighty low standards for a high falutin’ Trail Boss.”
“It always like this?” Rowdy asked Pete, shovelling stew into his mouth. “Gettin’ caught up in other people’s problems, when all we’re trying to do is push beeves?”

“Yes,” said Pete, at exactly the same moment Gil said “No.”

The two men looked at each other, Pete smiling, Gil’s face impassive, hard to read.

Rowdy glanced between them, waiting. He felt like there was a whole conversation happening that he couldn’t hear.

Finally Gil sighed. “Sometimes,” he conceded. “Gonna stick it out?”

Rowdy grinned. “Said I would, when you took me on, didn’t I?”

“That you did,” Gil answered, and handed Rowdy his leftovers, fingers just gently brushing Rowdy’s as he removed his hand.

Rowdy nodded resolutely, and ate.

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