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King Cobb

by Victor Gischler

Ronny wasn't sure at first if it was his brother's body.

The stampede had left Nathan Cobb a battered mash of blood and bone and hair, hoof marks like deep notary stamps the length of his broken body. It took Ronny and his two brothers staring at him for ten minutes, sweaty palmed and pallid, to recognize the corpse. Joey had finally decided it was Nathan when he saw the pink bandana. Only Nathan carried a pink bandana.

"Remember all the fights he got himself in?" Lee asked.

Joey and the youngest brother Ronny nodded agreement but without much emotion.

Two days later, the three shuffled in their wrinkled black suits, kicked at the gravel in the funeral home's parking lot.

"What started it, do you think?" asked Ronny.

"Anything," said Lee. "What's it matter?"

Joey said, "I heard of all kinds of things setting off a stampede. AM radios, electric toothbrushes, somebody whistling Dixie."

"I said it don't matter."

Ronny asked, "What's going to happen now?"

Nathan had been the oldest, in charge, managed the whole ranch after Dad took to the wheelchair. The question hung heavy in the dusty air.

What's going to happen now?

* * *

"I thought the sheriff had been through that already." Ronny unpacked his bag, put his neatly folded shirts into the empty dresser. His old room hadn't changed. Six years gone to Los Angeles, and the only thing different was the layer of dust.

"Hank's known Dad twenty years," said Joey. "All Dad had to do was say the stampede was an accident, and Hank just said fine and wrote it was an accident in his little book and that was it."

Ronny raised an eyebrow. "Wasn't it an accident?"

Joey scratched the stubble along his big horse jaw. "Just strange, that's all."

Ronny was the baby of the family. Only four years separated Nathan, Joey and Lee. Lee was the oldest now at 38, Joey 35. Ronny was junior to Lee by ten years, but in Ronny's eyes, he was the only one who had done anything with himself. While his brothers broke wild horses and drank whiskey and got into fights and raced tractors down by the river, Ronny had put himself through UCLA and was now a junior executive in a prestigious advertising firm.

"Cows don't stampede out of malice. Something just spooks them, and they go off."

Joey scooped a wad of tobacco from a leather pouch, jammed it deep into the wet recesses of his cheek with two fingers. "Maybe." He chewed slowly.

Ronny unpacked his toiletries, lining them in a neat row atop the dresser: comb, toothbrush, deodorant, razor and shaving gel. Outside, the cattle persisted in their dull mooing. The sound seeped into the house. Even now, after being away, Ronny still had a sense of the herd. The thick, dumb mass of meat writhing and chewing and crapping almost as a single entity.

Finally Joey said, "There's been talk."

"There's always talk."

"There's a fella called Burt Charles," said Joey.

"You don't have to tell me," said Ronny. "I know Burt."

Burt was one of the dozen or so hired men that helped work the ranch. He'd been with the Cobb family even before Ronny was born. A good man.

"You go talk to Burt then," said Joey. "You tell him I sent you." There was a hint of challenge in the older brother's voice.

"Not tonight," said Ronny. "Dad wants us all around the table for dinner."

"Sure." Joey fished around the room with his



eyes but couldn't find a place to spit.

* * *

The dinner table was three thick oaken planks hammered together with huge iron nails. The father and the remaining brothers sat in stale silence around it as Liddy trucked food in from the kitchen. Like Burt Charles, Liddy had also been with the family for years as maid and cook. She was an ageless, haggard, half-black, half-Apache woman with a surly disposition. But the house was spotless, the food excellent.

She put the ceramic serving trays on the table without tablecloth or heating pad. The rough wood had worn smooth and dark from years of use. Ronny noted his family's eating habits hadn't changed. All meat and starch. Potatoes, corn, heavy biscuits. The meal's main attraction was a roast the size of an engine block.

The room's only light came from the huge blaze in the hearth on the far side of the room. The dancing flames cast his family in a hellish orange, reflected oddly in the eyes of the stuffed deer's head over the doorway.

Ronny sat next to Joey and across from Lee. The two older brothers took after their father, thick, tall. Ruddy complexions, faces hewn from rough lumber. Lee's hair was thinning, and he tried to compensate by growing long, coarse sideburns. Ronny took more after Mother. Sharp features, fine lips and thin fingers. Just as tall as his brothers but leaner.

At the end of the table sat Dad, Virgil Cobb, in all his ancient and fading glory. He hunched in his wheelchair, pale eyes glittering from the dark reaches of his sunken sockets. Lips twisted, teeth a yellowing grimace. He shrunk within his plaid flannel shirt, now a size too large. It was buttoned to the top and at the cuffs, a woolen horse blanket over his lap.

No matter the season, Virgil Cobb always felt cold, the chill of an old man reduced to skin and bone.

Those glittering eyes swept his domain, ap-

praised his sons like vassals. *He sits there like King Lear*, thought Ronny. An old, wrecked monarch, choosing which son to love the most.

Ronny knew he couldn't win that one.

Virgil Cobb and his sons ate without talking, only the clink of flatware, the sounds of chewing and men passing dishes. And the herd, of course. Always the herd.

The meal ended, and Liddy cleared the table.

"Liddy." Virgil's voice was a rusty barn hinge.

She looked at the old man, waited.

"Bring the scotch from my office. The twenty year old stuff, and glasses for me and my boys."

"That's not good for you." Liddy's voice was flat and gray.

"Just bring it, woman."

She snorted and left.

The old man shifted the throttle on his electric wheel chair, and it moved back from the table and to the left. The wheelchair's little engine made a grinding sound, loud and sharp. Ronny winced, but his two brothers paid it no mind.

The old man caught Ronny's expression. "A little harsh on your delicate ears, eh?"

"It doesn't bother me, Dad."

"Wouldn't matter if it did. My chair. I can make any damn racket I want in my own house."

"It only happens when he backs up to the left," said Lee. "I've been after him to let me fix it."

"Plenty of other things need fixing more than this damn chair," said the old man. "You remember what I told you, Lee. You're running this place now that Nathan has passed, so forget the damned chair. It'll be time to ride the fences again next month." He jabbed a gnarled finger at Joey. "I haven't forgotten you. I need you too."

"You can count on me, Dad."

The old man turned to Ronny.

"I guess our little ranch troubles don't mean much to you way out on the coast."

"That's not true, Dad. I'd come if you needed me."

Virgil acted like he hadn't heard. "So are you



rich yet, Mr. Hollywood? Making big money selling toilet paper and toothpaste on television?"

"I'm working on a campaign for a water softener. If I do well, I might get promoted."

Virgil's next comment was cut short by Liddy and the arrival of the scotch. At the old man's instruction, Liddy filled each glass three fingers full and passed them around.

Virgil held up his glass. "To Nathan. A good son, and a man. You boys will have to work hard to live up to his example."

Ronny drank. It stung his throat hot and hard.

* * *

The brothers sat on the long, low porch in front of the house. Lee sat in one of the rockers. He'd produced a pocketknife and whittled aimlessly at a stick of firewood. He also puffed a fat, vile cigar. It seemed to be a race to see which Lee could make disappear first.

Joey leaned against the railing, away from Lee and Ronny. He stared hard toward the herd although it was too dark to see, cocked his head, to keep track of the mooing.

Ronny stood with his hands behind his back. There was a television inside, but no cable. Too early to sleep, but maybe he'd read in bed. He was about to bid his brothers goodnight when he heard the music and singing.

It took Ronny a moment to recognize his father's voice, high-pitched and raw but on-key: *I was dancing with my darling to the Tennessee waltz . . .*

"That ain't right," said Joey without turning around. "This ain't a time for singing with Nathan just in the ground."

"So what?" Lee whittled. "Let him sing."

"Just ain't proper."

Lee closed the knife, flicked the dwindled stick into the night.

"Where's the music coming from?" asked Ronny.

"Me and Lee got it for him last birthday." Joey jammed another wad of tobacco into his cheek.

"Dad sat in his office and sang along with the radio every night, so we thought he'd like it. What's it called again?"

"A karaoke machine," said Lee.

"Joey thinks maybe Nathan's death wasn't an accident," said Ronny.

Joey turned, frowned at Ronny.

Lee said nothing at first. He puffed his cigar fiercely, the orange tip washing him in pale fire. He looked like the doorman to hell, his eyes dark and hard, his mouth twisting into a rough snarl with each puff.

"That's fool's talk," said Lee.

"All I meant was it seemed strange." Joey's eyes bounced between Ronny and Lee.

"Nothing strange about a stampede," said Lee. "It happens."

"Sure." Joey nodded.

"But what was Nathan doing out in the middle of them? They'd already been brought in and fed and watered."

Lee put his hands on his thighs, rose tiredly from the rocker. "And just what would you know about it?"

"I admit it. I'm rusty," said Ronny. "Why don't you remind me? What could Nathan have been doing out there?"

"Just about a hundred different things," said Lee. "Or don't you remember? Maybe he saw a lame calf. Maybe a coyote got into the pen. It's a twenty-four hour job."

Ronny looked at his shoes. "I just thought you might know specifically."

Lee descended the porch steps, the old wood creaking. "I'm going to make the rounds. I don't want anymore talk about this, you hear? Let Dad alone. Let him sing. Let him do damn well whatever he wants." Lee faded into the darkness until only the glowing ember of the cigar bobbed up and down like a hot beacon.

On his way inside, Joey whispered, "You weren't supposed to say nothing in front of Lee. What are you trying to do? Make it hell for every-



one around here?"

Ronny paid no attention. He watched Lee's cigar burn in the night, wondered if his older brother were standing out there looking back at him.

* * *

Ronny heaved himself out of bed the next morning at seven, stumbled into the kitchen where Liddy wiped down the long counter with a wet rag. She looked at Ronny, her brow furrowing.

"Coffee?" Ronny's voice was still rough with sleep. He slumped at the small kitchen table.

"Everyone *else* finished breakfast an hour ago." She put cup and saucer in front of him, filled it from an old metal coffeepot.

"Did Burt Charles ride out with the others?" he asked.

"No," Liddy answered without looking up. "He's over the anvil today."

Ronny nodded. He'd heard Lee mention that the ranch's regular blacksmith had moved away two months ago after marrying a woman down in the panhandle.

"Liddy?"

"Yes?" She put away dishes now, still didn't look at Ronny.

"Were you around when Nathan . . ." He shifted awkwardly, cleared his throat. "I mean, did you see it."

"No."

"Nothing at all?"

"No." She heaved a basket of potatoes to the top of the counter, selected one and began peeling over the sink. "But I heard."

"From inside the house?"

"You don't mistake a thing like that. The whole earth moves." She shrugged. "Anyway, Mister Cobb's window was open."

"You were in his room?"

"In the office," she said. "He was at the window with the singing machine, and I was bringing coffee."

"What did he do?"

"Just watched," she said. "Snorting, running, kicking up dust. He watched it like watching an earthquake. Like watching the end of the world."

* * *

Ronny heard the rhythmic metal clang of hammer on anvil long before he rounded the barn and found Burt Charles under the low overhang. The wave of furnace heat washed over Ronny as he entered the smithy.

Burt set aside the hammer and extended a rough hand. "Hello, Ron." They shook. The old cowboy looked like a Marlboro poster, his skin leathery brown, white walrus moustache overwhelming his upper lip and yellowing. He wore a long leather blacksmith's apron.

"How have you been, Burt?"

"Can't complain. Me and the boys miss you around here. A little life went out of the place when you went away."

"I wish I could have visited under better circumstances." Ronny inspected Burt's blacksmithing tools as he spoke. "Joey said I should have a word with you."

Burt's smile crumpled. "I'm just as sorry as I can be about Nathan, Ron."

"I know."

"I'd hate to say something to reflect poorly on him after he's gone."

"I just want to make sure everything's straight," said Ronny.

"I was up in the hayloft when I heard Nathan talking to Miss Martina—I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that." Burt scratched his head. "I meant to say Martin. Martin Garland. The boys call him Miss Martina enough it just rubbed off."

"Why do they call him that?"

"Martin don't ride out with the herd," said Burt. "We took him on last year to husband the chickens and goats and other animals around here. He kind of holds himself separate from the rest of the boys, and you know how they are. Hell, a fellow bathes everyday regular and they call him sissy."

"Anything to that?"



Burt shrugged. "I wish you wouldn't make me say, Ron. I sure hate to talk against somebody that never done me any wrong."

"Okay, then."

"Talk to him yourself maybe."

"That's probably best," said Ronny. "What did you hear him say to Nathan?"

"I'm only repeating this because it involves your ma, so I think you have the right to hear."

Ronny's stomach tightened.

"Nathan was telling Martin about a conversation with the old man—um, that is your father. Seems they got into a big quarrel about how to run the place. Nathan told your father that they should start buying pick-up trucks to run the herd, cheaper and easier in the long run than keeping up horses."

Ronny smiled without cheer. "Dad didn't like that."

"Hell no." Burt chuckled, shook his head. "Mr. Cobb said right away that was your Mother's talk. Modernization, bringing in machines to do what men and horses have done for years. Nathan told Martin all about it. I guess they were closer friends than anyone knew."

"What did Martin say?"

"He just said not to let the old man get under his skin. He said Nathan was a good man with good ideas and he shouldn't worry about an old man set in his ways."

"Did you tell Lee any of this?" asked Ronny.

Burt shook his head. "Lee don't much care for Martin. I figured it would just cause trouble."

"Thanks for talking to me Burt."

"It's okay," said the old cowhand. "I just hope everything settles back to normal."

Ronny hoped so too. "Where can I find this Martin?"

Burt picked up his hammer. "With the chickens."

"Thanks, Burt."

The rhythmic clanging resumed as Ronny headed for the chicken house.

* * *

Ronny leaned on the post which held up the chicken wire. "How's it going?"

The young man in the pen was lanky, pale, corn-yellow hair pulled back in a ponytail. He held a sack from which he scooped chicken feed and spread it around the yard. He looked up quickly at Ronny. "Yes?"

"You're Martin? I'm Ronny Cobb."

"I know." Martin's features hardened, he went back to spreading the feed. "You've come to ask about Nathan."

"That's right." Ronny studied Martin. The young man had a different way about him. Haughty. Formal. He wore sneakers instead of boots.

"What would you like to know?" asked Martin.

"I hear you were close with Nathan."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that you were good buddies," said Ronny. "Where are you from?"

"Raleigh, North Carolina."

"How'd you get out here?"

Martin shrugged. "How does anyone get anywhere?"

Not a talker, thought Ronny. Fine. He'd cut to the chase. "I understand you might know something about what passed between my father and Nathan. Maybe something about our Ma."

"Why would you think that?"

"Is it true or not?"

Martin stopped spreading the feed. "Nathan and your father disagreed on some points. That's all. Nathan felt he could talk to me about it. I don't get along with my old man so well either. He doesn't like the way I live my life."

"What does it have to do with Ma?"

Martin shuffled his feet, looked at the sky and shaded his eyes against the early morning sun. "It's all about who's in control, I guess. You father's a hard man."

"True."

"Look," said Martin. "If I speak plainly, will



you hold it against me. Am I going to get fired or something?"

"Go ahead and talk."

"It's Lee you need to speak to, not me. They had fights, loud ones."

"They've always fought. Brothers."

"Well, these fights were about your father and the ranch and sometimes about me."

"Why you?"

Again, the shrug. Ronny thought Martin's whole life must've been one long shrug. This time Martin added a yawn, his pink tongue curling like a cat's.

"Lee thought I was a bad influence," said Martin. "He'd say to Nathan that the rest of the men were laughing at him for hanging around a chicken boy. People are idiots." He kicked at a chicken that had wandered too close. It flapped away, a comic flightless flailing.

"Was Nathan's death an accident, Martin?"

Martin didn't flinch at the question, didn't even blink. "Ask Lee."

Ronny nodded at him and turned away, trudged back toward the house. He'd have to speak to Lee, have to ask the hard questions. Even as kids, Lee had chafed under Nathan's rule.

But they all bowed to Dad.

Ronny didn't have long to wait. Lee rounded the barn with quick, long strides, intercepted Ronny just before the house.

"Lee, I wanted to ask you some—"

"You're not asking nobody nothing." Lee trembled, grit his teeth. "I just got done taking to Burt Charles."

"Lee—"

"Have you been talking to that sissy-boy Martin kid?"

"What did you and Nathan fight about? Was it Ma?"

"You don't know anything about it."

"That's why I'm asking."

"Well, I'm not asking," said Lee. "I'm telling. You leave off poking your nose in."

"Nathan was our brother. Don't you want to know why he was killed? Or is it that you already know?"

Lee balled his fists. His voice was low. "Stop talking right now."

"Nathan's dead and now you run the ranch. Dad's favorite now, aren't you?"

Lee's breath came hot through his teeth. "If you weren't family, I'd kill you for saying that."

"If you won't talk to me, I'll ask Dad."

"You're not talking to Dad. You're not going near him."

"I'd like to know where you were when the stampede started. Maybe Dad'd like to know too."

"I was with Dad, in his room when the stampede started. I already told the sheriff that."

"What was he doing?"

"At his desk," said Lee. "Working on the books."

"That's a lie! Liddy was with him. Dad was at the window with the karaoke machine."

Ronny turned toward the house, but Lee caught his arm, pulled him back. The brothers stared frozen at one another.

"Let go, Lee."

"Where're you going?"

"I said let go."

"Not if you're going to bother Dad."

Ronny jerked his arm away, but Lee leapt on him. They rolled to the ground in a tight clinch. Both tried to punch but neither could get leverage. They pushed away and staggered to their feet, a hot dust cloud hanging in the air around them.

Lee spat. "That sissy chicken boy's been leading you on. I'm telling you, Ronny, leave it be."

Ronny threw a sloppy punch. Lee turned, took it on the shoulder and jabbed a fist into Ronny's nose. Ronny stumbled back. Blood trickled over his lips. Lee ran forward to finish it, but Ronny clinched and they were both in the dust again. They rolled away from the house, toward the pens. The herd lifted its collective head, watched the fight with eerie cow disinterest.



The brothers punched, short ineffectual jabs to the ribs, and the back, the side of the head. The dust cloud grew. The herd stirred.

And just slipping into Ronny's peripheral vision came the chair. It wheeled along the porch, glided like a ghost down the wooden ramp in front of the house. Old man Cobb sat in the chair like Caesar watching his gladiators, wheeling forward, eyes glowering.

Ronny suddenly felt shame under the old man's glare, not because he was fighting. Because he was losing. Hate surged. He punched with renewed fervor, howling in his brother's grasp. They rolled in a tight embrace across the yard, smacked to a halt against a wooden post of the cattle fence. Ronny *whuffed* air, and Lee finally landed a solid punch on Ronny's lower lip.

Ronny spat. The taste of blood and dust and shame.

"Let him up, Lee." The old man's chair brought him on. "You're spooking the herd. What's this about, you two?"

Ronny shoved himself up, leaned against the fence post, kept his eyes on the ground. He felt the shifting herd through the wood.

"It's nothing, Dad," said Lee. "Go back inside."

"You don't tell me to go anywhere, boy." The chair hit a deep groove in the hard-packed dirt and stuck itself. Cobb worked the joystick, but it wouldn't budge. The tires spun and the little electric engine whined.

The cattle grew noisy, restless.

"Let me help you, Dad." Lee moved toward the old man.

"Get way. I can do it."

"Dad—"

The old man moved the joystick back and to the left. The gears ground. It sounded like screaming, like angels having their wings torn off. The cattle went crazy.

"Dad, don't—" Lee rushed to his father.

"Get away! I'm doing it!" The old man swat-

ted him away, ground the gears, his gnarled hand gripping the joystick white-knuckled.

Ronny felt the surge of beef against the fence, the posts cracked and snapped. He ran. The porch, he could get on the porch. All he needed was to get up a few feet, let the stampede seethe around him. He reached the porch, turned and saw Lee make it to the barn.

The cattle thundered around the house and out to the open range. Ronny shouted for his father, but his voice was lost in the pounding hooves. He saw one of the chair's wheels spin off into the herd, kicked between cows.

Ronny was numb by the time the last few cattle finally trailed after the raging herd. The hired men had come out of nowhere along with Joey. They got horses, rode after the fleeing animals. Lee emerged from the barn, walked slowly to the battered bloody mass strewn next to the shattered chair.

Ronny went to his father.

"Don't come over here," said Lee, but his voice lacked command.

Ronny looked long at his father, stumbled a few feet away, and emptied his guts.

* * *

Lee found Ronny on the porch after the sheriff left. Both brothers were tired, drained. Liddy brought them whisky then left them alone.

"What'd you tell him?"

"The truth," said Ronny. "Dad's chair started both stampedes. The karaoke machine amplified the grinding gears loud enough to start the first one. The second time he was close enough for the cattle to hear without any amplification. A mistake. Just a stupid, unlucky mistake."

"I guess." Lee looked away, squinted at the horizon.

Ronny waited, knew there was more.

"I did lie about being in Dad's room the day Nathan was killed," said Lee. "But I saw him in there the day before, watched him for an hour from the doorway. He didn't know I was watching."



Ronny closed his eyes. His stomach knotted.

“He kept making noises into that karaoke machine like it was some kind of experiment. He had the speaker pointed out the window, and he’d hold up his electric shaver to the microphone and the alarm clock and other stuff, seeing what the noise sounded like through the speaker.”

Ronny swallowed hard. “That doesn’t mean—”
“Joey’s bringing the truck around,” said Lee.

“He’ll drive you to the airport. I know you have to get back.”

Goodbyes were stiff and formal.

On the way to the airport, Ronny told Joey he should visit him on the coast sometime. When things settle down.

“Sure,” said Joey, his eyes fixed far ahead on the road. “Sounds like a good time.”

