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## Loose Ends

The slosh of our horses' hooves in the mud made me tighten my fingers around the reins. The climb was steep and the rain of the past few days had left the road slushy and slippery. I had my hood drawn to shield me from the droplets that fell intermittently from the trees whose branches canopied over the path. The rain had stopped but it had left its moisture behind to hang heavy in the air.

"What's our guy's name?" I asked, breaking the mind-numbing rhythm of the horses' footfalls.

"Chester-something," Pop said. He was the one who had the bounty poster and knew where we were going. "Shouldn't matter much though, I mean to make quick work of this fella."

"What'd he do?"

"Some real bad things. Killed a fella over in Langston or somewhere. Done robberies too—hurt some people."

"Huh." We hadn't gone after someone guilty of murder recently. I patted my saddlebag to double check its contents—my revolver was in there, sagging at the bottom of the bag underneath my packed lunch.

"You probably won't need that anyhow," Pop said. "I'll take care of it."

Something about his tone pricked at me. "I can handle myself," I reminded him.

"I know, Cherry," he said. His tone was stiff. I didn't pry any farther.

My horse was huffing by the time we reached the hill's summit and could see a ratty cabin across the plain. There was a lone cat meandering across the cabin's porch.

"I'll go straight in. You go 'round and keep an eye on the back side of the house in case he tries to rabbit," Pop said. He was being distant, like he had been since he found the papers for this guy. Pop had a history of clamming up on me sometimes, and I never knew if it was because he was worried about me or because he was annoyed by me. He wasn't the type to be honest about his thoughts.

"Fine," I muttered, and redirected my horse to the left, sticking to the tree line. I rounded the perimeter slowly; I kept my eye on the cabin and pulled to stop when I had a good view of the backdoor but could still watch Pop descend on the house. I made myself comfortable, got my revolver ready.

Pop disappeared on the other side of the house. The door crashed open and I could hear Pop shouting for our bounty. Another shout and then a scuffle erupted and there was a second voice—a loud, shrill, desperate voice. They were arguing about something, the bounty was pleading and scared. Something felt wrong.

I kicked my horse forward and she trotted toward the cabin at a steady pace. I was catching snippets of their conversation as I came closer—the bounty saying, "I don't know—" and Pop saying, "I know you do, you—" and mumbling in-between. I pulled my horse to a stop when I could see Pop through the back window. He was standing over the man, gun drawn, brow tight. The bounty was on his knees. And then the gun went off, the cat was running across the field, and the bounty was on the floor.

Pop stepped out of view. I swallowed around the dryness in my mouth and unhinged my tight grip on my revolver. I tucked it away and steered my horse around the front of the cabin where Pop was mounting his own.

“Should’ve known he was the violent type,” Pop was muttering. “Never mind him. We’ll send the sheriff’s boys out to get him. No point in bloodying up my horse.”

“Right,” I said.

Pop heaved a sigh. “Well. That’s that.”



It was two days later before the incident was brought to the forefront of my mind again. I had spent the evening at the bar with a friend and was only half-drunk. The night air was cool and silky, the stars were bright in the cloudless sky. I wanted to savor my trip to the apartment, so I led my horse behind me and went on foot.

But the bounty haunted me like a ghost. He was back there somewhere, moving in the shadows of my mind and the corner of my vision. Maybe that was why I stopped when the poster board caught my eye. Whiskey made my mind blurry, but that man—Chester, Pop said his name was—was still there wading through the syrupy flow of my consciousness, not wholly there but not wholly gone. Even after a night of drinking that presence made my eyes catch on everything. Now, they caught on a poster tacked to the board next to the train station gate. It was flapping in the wind like a wounded bird with one wing. I led my horse to a stop and left her behind as I approached the poster board, hand outstretched to smooth the poster down, when the words on the paper caught my eye. *Wanted:* it said, *Chester Lacey*. My hand froze in place, pinning down the free corner of the poster. I blinked to clear my vision and stared at the name, *Chester Lacey*.

He was wanted for moonshining. I smoothed my hand over it, stared some more. I watched, detached, as my hand ripped the poster down and folded it as neatly as I could manage, feeling weak in the fingers. I mounted my horse and rode the rest of the way to the apartment, my appetite for night air ruined.



Pop didn't make it back to the apartment until the next evening. He'd sent a letter ahead a couple days prior to say he was running some errands. When he did arrive, I was waiting for him.

"Did you get the money?" I asked him before he could set his bag down.

He stopped by the doorway. "I sure did," he said. "It's in the bank."

"Right."

He blinked again and set his bag down at the end of his bed, kicked his boots off. My eyes followed him. I shifted in his wingback chair.

"So, the sheriff made sure you got the money?" I asked. "Even though he was wanted alive?" He stopped again to look at me but said nothing. I pulled the bounty flier from my pocket and smoothed it out, held it up for him to see. "This him?"

He answered me with more silence. He was staring at the poster.

"Moonshining?" I prompted.

Pop lifted his chin and took a deep breath.

“He didn’t fight you,” I said. My mouth felt dry again. “I saw him through the window. I’d like to know why you killed him.”

“It’s nothin’ that concerns you,” he said.

“Doesn’t concern me, huh?” I pushed myself up from the chair, crushing a portion of the poster in my fist. “I’ve been huntin’ bounties with you for going on ten years, and this doesn’t concern me? You’ve been disappearing, Pop! You wander off for days or weeks at a time, say you’re working a bounty without me, but now you’re killin’ poeple? You owe me an explanation.”

“Hey, I don’t owe you nothin’,” Pop said.

“Give me an answer or I’m walking.”

He was glaring now, his pale eyes bright with anger. He wanted to say something nasty to me, I could feel the tension in his posture. I gave him a moment to think.

“Fine,” he said. His tone was clipped, but he was giving in. He sat down on the edge of his coffee table. “Before you, I was in with some bad people. Long story short, we were a tightknit group. I was real close with one of them. A job went south, and they left me. I got caught, I did my time. But I need to look them all in the eyes again, one at a time. I need to tie up the loose ends.”

“Was Chester a loose end?” I asked. “He’s sure not gonna betray you again.”

“I didn’t want to kill him. But I need to talk to Jeb, and Chester wouldn’t tell me where to find him. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t know how to reach him, and he could’ve warned him before I got to him.”

“To do what? Kill him? How many of ‘em have you killed?”

“Haven’t killed all of them,” he said. “Haven’t found all of them neither.”

“Oh,” I half-laughed.

“I didn’t mean—I don’t want to kill all of them,” he was saying. “And I don’t plan to. But I need to make my peace with Jeb.”

“What did Jeb do to you?” I asked.

Pop scratched his eyebrow and looked at the floor. “I trusted him. And he left me behind.”

“I don’t care,” I told him. He looked at me, something akin to hurt in his eyes, but more bitter and distant. “You can’t go around killing people. You’re better than that. This isn’t the job, remember? We don’t kill people, we take them in to serve their time.”

He hesitated. “I know where he is. I found his place. He’s up by the Canyon.”

“And?” I asked. “What do you want from him? You want him dead?” He didn’t answer. “Is he a criminal? You want to take him in?”

“They won’t do nothing,” Pop said bitterly. “They don’t have nothin’ on him, why do you think no one’s got him yet?”

His train of thought made me uncomfortable. My concept of justice had always operated within a certain realm. I may not have been too fond of the forms of law enforcement we had, but there was something in the separation between the lawless west and the job I had adopted that made me feel safe. I trusted myself more than I trusted both the law and the lawless, but it wasn’t my place, nor Pop’s, to judge who deserved to live or die.

“So, what do you want?” I asked.

“Just to speak with him,” Pop said.

“And you were willing to kill someone to do that?”

He huffed in frustration and rubbed his eye with his fist. “It’s complicated. Trust me, Cherry, I know what I’m doing. These men don’t deserve to be defended.”

There was something in his tone, deep in his eyes, a hot anger that ate at him from the inside. Something had happened to give him that anger, to make him pull the trigger on what I perceived as an innocent man. I could only reconcile this reality with the man I knew as Pop by thinking that perhaps the man he’d killed wasn’t so innocent. When I spoke again, my voice was quiet. “I don’t like you killin’ people, Pop.”

“I don’t like going on without retribution.” And that was that.

“You talk to him, then,” I said, “but I’m not gonna be there to have your back.”



Pop was gone when I woke up in the morning, but the place wasn’t hard to find, there were only a few homes up here by the Canyon. I could see Pop’s horse flicking its tail in boredom outside the first barn I approached.

I left my horse at a good distance and approached with my revolver in hand, my footsteps quiet. I snuck around until I had a view inside the barn, and there Pop was. He was just standing there, waiting for something. I eased back into the tree-line, crouched where he couldn’t see me, and waited with him.

It was maybe twenty minutes before another man rode in. I watched him closely; he paused at the sight of Pop's horse and then dismounted, lead his steed cautiously into the barn. There he stopped. "James," he said in quiet disbelief.

Pop was quiet. His hand was resting casually on his holster. He was staring at him with piercing, angry eyes. They were exchanging words in a hushed, tense tone. And Pop pulled out his gun and aimed at the man, and the man used the weight of his own body to throw Pop off, and they were on the ground, grabbing at each other's necks. Pop somehow got the advantage.

I broke into a run toward them—I stupidly dropped my gun in the mud and went in unarmed, with only my voice and my prying hands. We were all yelling; Jeb was defending himself valiantly, Pop was letting out his rage with his fists. His knee was in Jeb's back, his hand on the back of Jeb's head to rub his face in the dirt and horse shit. I was grabbing at Pop, gripping his shoulders and yanking with no success. There was a gun somewhere—Pop's, I thought—but it was on the ground and now there were both struggling for it, hands swiping at the dirt for the handle. I let go of Pop and made to reach for it myself, but a hand closed around it, it raised, it went off.

I froze. I couldn't feel the breath in my lungs, or the bite of the cold in my cheeks. I felt nothing, until I stepped back and then felt the searing, burning, biting pain. A hot iron in my left shoulder, nestled into my body. Fire inside me. I exhaled and felt everything again—the cold, the breath. I felt Pop's eyes on me, and then he wasn't looking at me anymore.

The gun went off again, the fight was over. A chunk of Jeb's head was gone now. My stomach turned and I may have vomited if I felt like I could.

“He shot you,” Pop was saying. He was grabbing me, his hands on my arms, gentle but painful, fear in his eyes. “God, he shot you, fuck—” He was muttering a string of curse words.

I pushed his hands off. “Stop it,” I said.

“Fuck-I’m sorry, did I hurt you? Are you okay?”

“Stop it,” I said again. I took a shaky step away from him. My right hand was on my left shoulder now, as if I could grip the pain away. “Stop it. We’re done.”

He blinked at me. “Cherry,” he said. “My darling, let me get you to a doctor.”

“No.”

“Please.”

“I said no!” I snapped.

“Cherry,” he said. There was a shift in his tone—he sounded like he thought he had a right to tell me what to do.

“No,” I said. “Maybe if you hadn’t killed your last family, you could go back to them.” still gripping my shoulder, I made myself move toward the open door of the barn.

“Cherry!” he said again. “You’re hurt.”

“Yeah. But I can take care of myself.” I was walking toward my horse, even though I couldn’t feel my feet. My shoulder searing and my one good hand slick with blood, I pulled myself onto my mare “Besides,” I said. “I don’t owe you nothin’.” And I left.