

Heather King

Word Count: 1635

Disclaimer: many of these names were based off a spaghetti western game called "BANG"

### Wild Western Tragedy

Her hand shook as she poured the drink. She struggled not to spill it and when she finished, she slowly set the bottle back down on the wooden counter. She was nervous; she wasn't sure why.

"So I told him he was speaking balderdash and to get the heck outta my saloon." Bart Cassidy had been telling a story that, in all honesty, Valerie was not paying any attention to. The large man leaned back in his chair, feet on the table, with a cigar in his mouth. His cowboy hat was slightly too far down his forehead; he looked so relaxed. Valerie, on the other hand, a short woman with curly blonde hair, a cheap dress, and a plain face, constantly jerked her eyes up to make sure he wasn't watching her as she pulled up another bottle she received from the pharmacist in town just that morning. Her hand shook even more this time as she let a few drops fall into the whiskey. She looked again at Bart and saw his mouth move, but she couldn't hear anything over the ringing in her ears.

When she looked back down she realized she had lost count of how many drops she let fall. She tried to steady her breath and then decided to just add another large splash of the poison to make sure. She didn't want to think about what would happen if he didn't die because she didn't add enough, or what would happen if he saw what she was doing before she did it.

She closed the bottle and hid it back under the counter. She wiped the sweat off her palms onto her dress and took the cool glass. She came around the bar to the table Bart was reclining at and handed him the drink. She tried to smile, but wasn't doing a very good job. Luckily, he was too consumed by his own story to notice.

“So then I said ‘That Johnny Kisch is nothing but an impoverished rascal who will never have a saloon as successful as the Tanglefoot.’ Well that got him madder than an old wet hen. He threw his glass right at my head. Well, I saw it coming a mile away so I ducked and-” Bart stopped to take a drink. Valerie's fake smile faded and she just watched with him as he sucked down everything in the glass and continued with his story. He started his story again, but stopped a second or two after. At first he was simply puzzled, but then fear flooded his face. He put his hand to his chest like he couldn't breathe. His body convulsed involuntarily which made Valerie scream and back away. She wasn't expecting this look that Bart gave her. He couldn't have looked more hurt by this betrayal. *Why you?* his face asked her. He convulsed again, but more violently this time and it made him fall off his chair. When he finally stopped seizing, she slowly walked up to him and kneeled down. She poked at him first and then gently pressed her fingers under his neck to feel his pulse. *Nothing.*

Quickly, she pushed his whole body over and pressed her ear to his heart. *Nothing.* She lifted her head and tried to smile. The job was done; she was a rich woman now. She saved the town from disaster and everybody would thank her. But she wasn't expecting this feeling. This

guilty feeling. Valerie was the town renegade; she was hired to kill people. She thought she was used to it.

She decided to check Bart's heartbeat again and put her ear to his chest. But even as she knew she wouldn't hear anything, she kept her head on his chest and started to cry. She wailed and pounded her fists into his stomach. She cursed Bart's name. Then she cursed Greg Digger - the name of the pharmacist who hired her to do this. Then she cursed herself. She wanted to blame Greg for all of it, but she also knew that it was her own hands that poured the poison.

"Why me?" she had asked Greg. He never gave her an answer.

Valerie gathered her strength to lift Bart up onto a chair. His head leaned over the table, hat on the floor, hand holding the glass he had his last drink with. Then she walked back over to the bar and took an empty bottle of whiskey, placed it on the table. These were her responsibilities as part of the deal. When she finished, she retreated to the dusty floor. Flies buzzed around her and then she watched them land on Bart. Her breath caught and she started crying again.

Valerie stayed there for a long while in the hot saloon. The air was sticky and smelled of smoke and alcohol. She waited for the sun to rise. Bart's saloon - The Tanglefoot - was relatively new to the town of Cottonwood Falls, Kansas. Bart opened it after he got in a fight with Johnny Kisch - the owner of The Bull's Head saloon. Johnny was the breed of man who didn't like change. He had been the owner of the only saloon in town for decades. Bart walked in one day and started spouting all this stuff about how the town needed to change. It needed to start

following what the big cities were doing or else it would be left in the dust. And the town was already dusty enough.

Johnny didn't take this well. He was especially upset that Bart chose his saloon to proclaim nonsense propaganda. So there was a fight, which Johnny easily won because he was smarter with his punches. When Bart finally got out he swore he'd start his own saloon which wasn't too much of a challenge for him since he owned so many businesses in town already. His main business was a bank and he had plans to start many more. That was one reason the town wasn't so fond of the man. His intentions were to put them out of business and then employ them for his own company. It was a rotten way to do work. Valerie knew this, but she stayed out of most affairs of the town.

Greg walked in before the sun was fully up. The first thing he said to her was "Quit your cryin'. He ain't worth it."

In her head, Valerie knew this was true. Bart was a despicable man, after all. And she had no real connection to him anyway. But Valerie's face turned sour. She got off the floor and stared maliciously at Greg for a second or two before she ran screaming at him. She was able to knock him to the ground, but Greg was much stronger than her and soon he was on top of her pinning her to the floor.

"I don't want to hurt you!" he yelled over her screaming.

But her screaming turned to more crying. "I killed him! Why did you make me kill him?!"

Greg got up off the floor taking a long look at her. "You're an odd stick, Ms. Custer. Anyone else in this town would have been happy to see this man dead. I thought you would feel the same when I hired you."

Valerie wasn't really listening, but she kept whispering to herself *I killed him. I killed him. I killed him.* At the same time she wondered what was wrong with herself. What was so different about this kill than all the others? She couldn't explain to anyone, she just felt broken.

"C'mon, now. They'll find him in the mornin', best you don't stay much longer." He practically had to pick Valerie up to get her out of the door. He held her arm as they walked down the street. Greg had a kind face. He had moved to their town - Cottonwood Falls - several years ago, before even Bart had arrived. At first Greg was a farmer, but his goal was to become a pharmacist because he had a passion for medicine. Bart had basically discredited Greg when the medicine Bart received didn't magically heal him. Greg had to go back to his farming because no one would buy medicine from him. More recently, as Bart's popularity diminished, Greg became trusted again and found that what Bart had done to him, he had done to practically everyone else too.

Valerie didn't know where they were going until she was led through the doors of the other saloon in town - The Bull's Head. Inside standing at the bar were Johnny Kisch, Dave Allen, Oliver Murphy, and Belle Starre. Greg sat Valerie down on a stool and backed away.

“What happened?” Dave asked and he brought a blanket to wrap around Valerie.

“He’s gone,” Greg answered. A collective sigh of relief came out of everyone present.

Valerie lingered in The Bull’s Head for a long time. At some point Dave came to her. “I’m really sorry,” he said.

“Whatever for?” she asked expressionless.

“We used you to get rid of Bart.”

“I was just doing my job.”

“But it feels different this time, right?”

“I don’t know what I feel.”

Dave brushed her hair out of her eyes. “It’s gonna be okay.”

“I just wish I knew why this time was different.” Her words were a harsh whisper.

“Knowing why ain’t gonna bring you any sorta peace.”

“I can’t be a renegade no more. I thought it would make me a hero. I thought I was perfect for it since I never cared about no one but myself. But I cared this time. And I took a life. And I can never give it back.”