

The Unheld by Luke Larkin – Daily Dead Excerpt (Chapter 3)

Charlie woke in the thick of the night to a sound that prickled down her back and all along her arms and legs. It was a shuffling sound, and at first she thought there may be a wolf out there, or a coyote, on just the other side of the cabin wall. But as she gathered her wits and shook off the shroud of troubled sleep, something about the noise sent her mind reeling. If it were a wolf, or a badger, or even a bear that'd come from the woods, something was wrong with it. There was too much shuffling, as though whatever it was had been injured to the point of dragging itself along. Or else it had quite too many legs. Far too many. Was it many wolves, then, a pack? No, Charlie decided. As she sat up and held her breath, she felt strongly that it was only a single thing. A single thing with too many legs outside the cabin.

As quietly as she could, she lifted herself from the cot and crossed the cabin floor to her sleeping father. Tentatively, she reached out a hand to stir him. Before she could so much as touch him, his eyes shot open and he reached out and grasped her hand. Charlie yelped. The thing moved outside, startled by the noise.

"What're you up to?" her father groaned.

"Something out there, Pa," Charlie said.

"Coyote."

"No. Something strange."

"Leave me be," he said, rolled over, and was asleep as quickly as he had awoken.

Charlie stood alone in the dark, blood rushing past her ears. There was something more than strange out there. She couldn't tell how she knew, but she did. She felt it, and she felt it clear as she sometimes felt the presence of that specter woman who was probably her mother.

She remembered Mr. Elias's words, that if ever her father caught something as curious as that owl, he should come calling. Charlie wondered if whatever it was outside would be at least as curious, and she thought of presenting it to the mysterious man. She thought of selling it to him. The weight of money in her hands, money that was hers and that might buy, at the very least, a new pair of boots. Boots that fit. And a dress as fine as the ones the ladies in town wore. Or a train ticket.

Carefully, Charlie stole toward the door of the cabin. She didn't bother with her boots; slipping them on and lacing them would only waste precious time. Instead, she reached up and lifted her father's six-shooter from its holster, where it hung below the

rifle. The weight of it surprised her, but after a moment she stayed herself and found her balance. She'd held it once before, even fired it. But only once.

After a pause to listen and ensure her father was still sound asleep, Charlie crept out the door and into the night.

The air was cold now that the sun wasn't up to heat the plains, and by the position of the moon in the sky Charlie guessed it was about three in the morning. A lonely hour when it seemed to Charlie all the world was asleep. The whistle of the train gave her a start, but on the second and third call its familiar song set her more at ease. Someone was awake, then. Someone was manning the train, out there on the plains. She wasn't entirely alone.

A sound from behind the cabin agreed: No, she was not at all alone. Whatever it was that had been shuffling about was still nearby, and she gathered it was poking around the shed. Charlie bent at the knees and started past the corner, six-shooter lifted at a slight angle and finger resting on the trigger guard the way she'd seen her father do on the single occasion he'd taken her hunting.

Across the dirt yard, in the dim moonlight, she spied the shed. Its door hung ajar, the weighty crossbar discarded in the mud, and the sight of it set a stir in Charlie's stomach. It took her father most of his strength to lift that bar, and he was not a feeble man. Whatever had lifted it now—

Charlie shuddered to think. A big cat, maybe, but what sort of cat had the knack for it? A bear, more likely. But then, these days, odds were it was not a normal bear. Charlie's mind raced with any number of combinations of grotesque features it might have.

Her mind did not have to work long, however. There, in the pale, dim moonlight, her eyes caught something that stopped her thoughts dead in their tracks. Charlie gazed into the dark maw of the shack's opened door. Around its frame, slow and creeping, curled a single hand. Slender and small and ghostly.