

—| **KATHY PARA** | Coyote

CASSANDRA CHIPPED AT THE ICE in the water barrel with the blade of the shovel. Frozen six inches at least. Shards flew by her eyes. Sweat ran down her back, and she knew she'd soon be shivering. Pre-dawn light leaked over the horizon. The hose lay rock hard and useless on the ground.

She could hear the horses inside the barn move restlessly in their stalls. They were tight and tense. She'd given them extra grain, but something had them spooked. Four nervous horses. The mare let out a squeal and Cassandra heard the thud of a hind foot hitting the wall. She considered leaving them in all day. It had to be warmer inside than outside. Minus twenty-two. The mare pounded the wall again. If she put them out on the field, they'd work off whatever was winding them up. But she'd have to water them by hand; the barrel was filled with ice. She should get an electric water heater in town. She might even have one somewhere. These were Brian's chores. Goddamn him! He should be here to handle the ice. One of the horses snorted and pawed, rattling its stall door. Screw it, she decided. They're going out.

Overnight, arctic air had rolled across the mountaintops and pooled in the valley, solidifying the small creek that wound through the property. No snow on the ground yet. Everything as hard as concrete. The air thin and brittle. Even the chickadees were silent and still. Her glove stuck to the handle of the barn door, half-melted ice chips welding the leather to the metal. She yanked her glove away and wedged herself into the opening. She shoved with her back, and the tractor-sized door slid open reluctantly. Her eye caught movement in the shadows, a flash of reflected light. Something stared at her from behind a bale of hay. The horses stamped, their breath rising in twisted plumes. It moved again, and Cassandra deciphered the pointed face and ears of a coyote. Its coat was ragged, and it looked thin. Its yellow eyes never broke her stare until she stamped her foot, then it twitched and broke into a trot, headed for the door, downy chicken feathers dangling from its fur. The coyote paused and glanced back. The thief. She threw her shovel against the plywood siding and the animal disappeared around the edge of the opening. She could have sworn the coyote had smiled at her just before it vanished.

Cassandra kicked off her boots by the porch door. The house was small and painted white with an addition on the back that made the floor slant downhill.

The fire in the wood stove had died, and the house was barely warm. She'd spent all morning cleaning stalls, carrying water, and inspecting the chicken coop, trying to see how the coyote had gotten in. She ignored the pots stacked in the sink from chili three nights ago and rummaged half-heartedly through the spare room for the water heater. She was more interested in whether Brian had left behind his .22. She pushed aside the stacks of science fiction novels and the trophy Brian had won in high school and found a box packed with his runners, summer shorts, and a pile of ratty T-shirts. Some of this stuff could be jammed into the wood stove and burned. The crib was still pushed against the wall, baby items stacked inside collecting dust. Fuck it. There was no heater and no gun. She'd have to go to town.

Everyone in town thought she was crazy, out there all alone. Her father had come out to help, but she'd seen him shake his head. He hadn't put into words what the frown on his face said clearly: she couldn't make it alone on fifty acres with four horses, chickens, and no dog. What if the power goes out, he'd asked. What if the tractor breaks down? What about the fences, the irrigation, the hay? I can manage, she'd answered, but she'd felt like an acrobat she'd seen on TV, spinning a plate on a stick, adding another stick and another plate, until she had fists full of sticks and plates ready to crash the minute she took her eyes off them. Why do you need this place so much, he'd asked. Because I do, she'd answered, exasperated. She didn't know why.

She parked the truck in front of the feed store and left the motor running to keep it warm. Inside, she stopped at the bulletin board by the front door and scanned the ads for puppies. Mutts and herding pups for sale, mostly. A photo of a German Shepherd reminded her of Levon. Her dog. Brian's dog, now. She turned away from the ads, trying to breathe through the iron band that constricted her chest. It was too hard.

She searched for a water heater, a floater with an element attached. She figured she'd run an extension cord from the barn. She couldn't remember how Brian had it rigged last year. She should have paid attention, but she'd been planning a spring horse show for her riding students. Brian had been drifting by then. She'd noticed, but she hadn't paid attention to that either.

She found a heater and took it to the back counter. "How're you doing, Cassandra?" Mr. Bartet asked.

"All froze up." Cassandra grabbed a pair of winter work gloves from the bin beside the counter and put them down beside the heater. "On the account, please."

Bartet opened a drawer and pulled out a small account book with the name Crowe written on the front in black felt pen. He pulled a note out of the book and looked at Cassandra. "Account's been put on hold for . . . I guess it hasn't been paid in a while."

"Since when?"

"Looks like three months."

"He said he'd pay the expenses."

"Looks like they tried to phone. Can you bring it up to date?"

"I have horses to feed. Brian promised. How much is it?"

"Fifteen hundred and twenty-eight."

"Sorry Mr. Bartet." Cassandra pitched the gloves back into the bin. "I'll have to . . . I can't . . ." She could feel heat flush her cheeks. "Goddamn him." She moved away.

"He's over at the Watson ranch running their steers," he said in a low voice.

"Maybe you could catch him there."

Cassandra twisted around. "What?"

"Brian. He's over at the Watson's."

Last she'd heard Brian was in Mexico with that girl. So now he was back. "Oh." Cassandra zipped up her coat. "Thanks. I have to go. Sorry." She walked out of the store and stood on the loading dock, chewing on the skin around her fingernails. The truck idled in the parking lot in a haze of warm air that escaped from the cracks in the body, exhaust rising like smoke into the still, cold air.

Grey clouds rolled in from the west and collected over Kalamalka Lake. To the east, towards the Monashees, the sky shimmered blue white through a haze of ice crystals. Cassandra tasted iron in the air. Snow was coming. The valley looked dingy in November: bunch grass faded from blonde to grey, colourless fields of bare apple trees, dust rippling in waves across the highway. Grit pelted the windshield of the truck. She imagined herself flayed by sand in a wind so strong it would rip away the pain in her chest. Skinless. Maybe then the feeling of being encased in lead would disappear.

The road to the Watson ranch turned off the highway about five miles east of Vernon. Two hundred acres of prime land, plus grazing range in the summer. She followed the drive up the south-facing hillside. They had a nice spread. The house was built at the top of the slope that ran gently a mile to the highway. They grew corn for silage and raised Herefords. Pregnant cows stood nose to tail in the field, crowding together to protect themselves from the cold. The steers milled in smaller pens farther up the drive. She hadn't spoken to Milly Watson lately. Maybe years. She couldn't remember.

A man working on the fence looked up as she drove in. Her heart began to pound. She hadn't seen Brian since he'd left for good. Five months, almost six. She squinted. She didn't recognize the coat or the hat, but when she got closer, she saw it was him. She tried to swallow. Her mouth was dry and her palms began to sweat on the steering wheel. She stopped on the driveway, and he walked up to her window.

"Hey, Cassie." Brian crossed his arms, folding a hammer under his coat sleeve.

He looked cheerful. It made her angry. "What the fuck is with you?"

"Still so ladylike."

"How am I supposed to run the farm now?"

"Like everyone else does. What's your problem?"

"You said you'd pay the feed store. They cut off the account, Brian. You're supposed to pay the bill. How am I supposed to feed my horses?"

"Jesus, is that all? I'll take care of it. I just forgot." Brian pushed back his cowboy hat and smiled at her.

She'd forgotten how beautiful he was, what his smile would do to her. Blonde hair stuck out from under his hat. She wanted to reach out and smooth the errant bits behind his ears. Either that or punch him in the face.

He leaned on the truck door. "Don't worry about it."

"Yeah?" She could smell him now, a mix of sweat and soap.

"Yeah. So. Are you ok?"

"It's not that easy."

"Man, your head's gonna pop right off. I've never seen anyone get so Goddamn mad."

"Fuck you."

Brian jammed his hat down over his eyes. "I'm starting to run out of apologies."

"I haven't heard any apologies. I just hear the usual bullshit."

"This is old, and I got work to do."

"Take care of the bill."

"I heard you."

Cassandra jammed the truck into reverse. The gears ground, and she could see Brian wince. The motor whined as she drove the truck backwards. Her foot hit the brake as a thought occurred to her. She shifted into first and drove back up the hill.

"Where's your .22?"

"What, you gonna shoot me with it?"

"Got a coyote problem. Can I borrow it?"

"You're going to shoot coyotes?"

"I do all kinds of things. Can I have it or not?"

"Yeah, I guess." He stared at her a minute. "Right now?"

"Yeah."

He looked up at the house. "Sharon is home. With the baby." He squirmed uncomfortably under his coat.

"You live here?"

"Dad bought us the place."

"You and Sharon and the baby. And the Watson Ranch. Cozy."

"You get to keep the farm."

"Your daddy's a handy guy. First our land, now this." She watched Brian fidget and then stare at the ground. "We were supposed to have a family," she said, pushing him.

"Those horses are your family. Shows, training, teaching. What the hell'd you need me for?"

"You never said anything. You just started fucking someone else. Grown-ups don't do that." She heard the bitterness in her voice and clamped her mouth shut. She looked up and saw her dog racing down the driveway. Levon jumped up against the door of the truck and yelped excitedly. He licked her hand. Cassandra got out of the truck and wrapped her arms around Levon. "What about the gun?"

"It's in the house." Brian started up the driveway and then turned back to her. "That's my dog, and you're not part of my family." His voice cracked as he said it. He didn't look cheerful anymore.

Cassandra twisted her fingers into Levon's fur. The words cut her open, leaving her raw and exposed. Brian waited, as if he expected her to say something in return. She stared back at him, and, finally, he turned to the house. She hugged Levon until the cold bit in and hung on.

By the time she got home, the snow was falling in pellets that tinked against the metal roof of the hen house. Eleven hens were dead on the floor, heads lolling on broken necks, feathers strewn and blood spattered on the walls. Entrails were caught on a nail, dangling, steaming. Cassandra imagined the coyote trotting away with a half-eaten bird. The rest of the chickens were milling in the corner, scrambling over each other to get away from the scent of blood. She wondered what to do with the carcasses. The ground was frozen solid. She couldn't bury them, leaving them out would just attract . . . she'd use them as bait. She went back to the house and grabbed a green garbage bag. Putting on

work gloves, she carefully dropped the birds into the bag and then put them in the freezer. She went back and nailed down the loose board that the coyote had found. No more holes. By the time she'd brought the horses in, the snow had filled in gaps and started to top fence posts. She walked back up the driveway, her boots leaving a trail in the skim of white on the ground. When she got inside the house, she called her father.

He brought traps in the back of his truck. They were rusty from the years in his barn. She remembered where they had hung. Cassandra loved her father's barn and the neat farmhouse she'd grown up in, the gladiolas in summer, the sound of wind in the Douglas firs that stood at the back of the property. The windows of the house had leaded panes. As a child, she had peered through them, studying the strange distortions and reflections of the outside world, comparing them to the actual shapes seen through the next pane of glass. Her mother was warm and funny; her father tough. He'd been a grader operator for the Department of Highways, not a real farmer. Now he was retired. He knew, though, about trapping.

"You'll need to boil the trap for an hour with sumac berries. Gets the smell of rust and oil off."

Cassandra picked up the leghold trap. It was heavier than she expected. She'd have to find a pot.

"Hang it up, and when it's cool dip it in trap wax." Her father handed her a small package. "This stuff can explode if you heat it too fast, so be careful." He looked at her. "You're sure about this? You're not much of a hunter."

She had chewed the skin around her thumbnail until the flesh was raw and bleeding, her tongue seeking out the damage. It stung. "It's eating my chickens. What do you suggest?"

"Get rid of the birds."

"What?"

"You don't need chickens."

"This is my farm. I'll decide what I need or don't need."

"God, you're stubborn."

"It's a coyote. How hard can it be to get rid of it?"

"Shoot one and two more will take its place. It's got a den out there. Pups, a pack maybe."

"There's just one."

He kicked the trap on the kitchen floor and looked around. "Don't you ever clean up around here?"

She looked around. Dirty dishes piled in the sink. Junk mail on the counter, newspapers, mud on the floor, old coffee molding in the pot. She had jammed her dirty clothes in the washer, more out of necessity than shame. She knew she should care more about the mess. She just couldn't find the part of her that gave a damn.

"You could come home."

"I'm good here."

"Just for a while. Till you get things sorted out."

"They are sorted. He has the new life, and I have the old one."

Her father touched her hand and then squeezed it. She looked up at him in surprise. He'd never been a tender man. She jerked her hand away.

"The snow's piling up. You should go before things get bad on the road."

Her father picked up the trap. "Keep the chain short when you set it. Use gloves and a tarp on the ground to hold your tools. That'll keep your scent off."

Cassandra nodded. "You said that already. I'll call if I have any questions."

"It's not easy, killing something."

"I know."

She remembered being ten, carrying mewling kittens to him in the garden, one at a time and him slamming a shovel down on each tiny head. Too many cats. She'd cried as she'd carried them, understanding that she was complicit in their deaths.

"You made me tough." Cassandra said, looking at the gun on the couch. "Like you."

Her father nodded and pulled his coat close. "Yeah," he said. "Good luck with that."

Cassandra spent the morning feeding horses, cleaning stalls, and looking after the chickens. The snow fell in large, fat flakes now. It was almost knee deep in places, soft and powdery. She unfolded the four-by-four tarp and laid it down close to the chicken coop. The trap, the chain, and the stake were in the supply box she had carried out with her. She set the trap in the snow and covered it slightly. She pounded the stake through the loop on the chain into the frozen ground with a hatchet. It rang, and the vibration jolted up her arm. Just in front of the trap, she dug a hole and dropped in a frozen chicken. That she covered with snow as well. The scent bottle was old, but she thought she'd use it anyway. She sprinkled some of the liquid close to the chicken, then wrapped up the equipment in the tarp and dragged it back to the barn. Satisfied, Cassandra got out the tractor and ploughed the driveway.

Brian's trophy sat on the fence post, glinting dully in the afternoon light. Cassandra pushed the bullet into the chamber and cocked the lever. It slid smoothly. She put the gun to her shoulder. It smelled like metal and oil. She sited

the trophy though the notches on the gun and pulled the trigger. It snapped coldly. The trophy sat untouched. She ground her teeth, loaded another bullet, metal clicking smoothly. This was harder than it looked.

She hit the trophy on the second day. A smile crossed her lips for the first time in six months. It felt good. The plastic figure at the top shattered. She tried again, and the gold cup underneath fractured and split. Then she shot it one more time, just to be sure.

Another week passed. The weather warmed, and the snow settled, heavy and thick. Coyote tracks concentrated around the hen house, but it wouldn't take the bait. She practised with the gun, shooting at squirrels when she saw them, or crows. She lurched through each morning's routine sliding in the greasy snow: check the trap, feed the hens, collect the eggs, feed the horses, clean the stalls, shoot the gun. In the afternoon she read pamphlets and books on coyotes, "one of nature's most cunning and clever predators." Sketches of paw prints fascinated her. The front paw was larger than the back; the tracks she'd seen in the snow overlapped as if they belonged to a strange two-legged creature. Cassandra hovered around the trap in the afternoon, wondering if she should put out new bait or move the steel monster to another location. If she moved it, she might have to clean it again, so she left it where it lay.

The phone rang one day at lunch. She pushed aside her canned spaghetti and put her head down on the table until it stopped ringing.

The string of grey days ended after a week, the dawn pale yellow. Cassandra trudged out to feed the chickens and found the coyote caught in the trap. It crouched on the ground beside the coop, snarling and snapping at her. Its leg was caught up to the shoulder blade, the length of chain tight from the stake. A bone stuck out of the leg below the metal jaws. The coyote's tail twitched erratically. The whites of its eyes showed. It looked crazed. Blood spattered the snow. Panicked, she realized she hadn't brought the gun and ran back to the house, her boots sliding in the snow. She loaded the .22, her hands shaking as she dropped the bullet into the chamber and a couple of extra in her pocket. She walked back, wanting to run the other way. Nausea threatened to become vomit. Stars prickled at the edge of her vision. The way the coyote had looked at her, like it had lost its mind. She had done that. Driven a creature insane, wounded it beyond repair. She had to sit in the snow bank and put her head between her knees. A sound rose from behind the coop. The coyote wailed in a voice she didn't think was possible, a cross between a howl and a scream. She went cold to her core and shivered miserably.

Cassandra stood over the coyote and aimed at its head. It thrashed at the last second. She shot it in the shoulder and it kiyied like a dog. She reloaded and aimed again. This time the bullet missed and kicked up the snow by its foot. The coyote stared at her, gurgling. Cassandra trembled and tried to hold the gun steady while she jammed another bullet into the chamber. The air tasted of rust. She thought about putting her boot on the coyote's muzzle, but she thought she'd probably shoot her foot off. She pulled the trigger. The animal jolted and shuddered, then lay limp in the snow. Cassandra took a ragged breath and began to cry.

She could hear the faintest of sounds: the house expanding in the cold, pipes creaking in the wall, heat moving through the register, the skitter of snow across glass. The sun shone through the window in the family room, dust raising the shaft of light. She could see chickadees outside checking the bird feeder. She hadn't put out birdseed yet this winter. She wondered if she had some and got up off the couch. After rummaging in the pantry, she found a bag. The seeds slid through her fingers like smooth sand, golden. She walked to the front of the house where the bird feeder hung from a Rowan tree and poured the seed into the cups. She waited. It would take a while before they came back. The mountains on the north side of the valley were brilliant white. Navy blue shadows marked the creases and folds. The air was sharp and clean in the sunlight. Inside the house the phone rang. It startled her. She stood at the bird feeder in her slippers. It rang again, and Cassandra turned to follow her trail back to the house. *Yes, she thought. I need to answer the phone.*