

Until the night he disappeared, my husband always hunted. Brought home deer, elk. Bear. He's the one who taught me to break open a rib cage. Cut out a gut pile from throat to tail without stabbing the bladder or wasting meat.

It was hard at first. The blood. Hair and fur matted to flesh. But I got used to it. Learned to see game only as hide and sustenance. It's amazing what we're capable of when it comes to survival. I learned to separate my mind from what my hands had to do. To strip away memory as I sliced flesh from bone. There are times in my life I can't remember at all. As if someone else did those terrible things I had to do.

But the killing part. That was a man's job, my husband would say. So I never pulled the trigger. Just sharpened his knife. Cut back straps from spines and into steak. Carved stew meat out of gristle. And now I can quarter any animal. Butcher an elk with a pocket knife. Because the bones don't ever touch. Skin and muscle's what holds it all together. The bone saw was only to make the work go faster. Especially when you had to get it done quick.

My husband showed me how to hang meat. Let it age. He taught me to forget things I couldn't stand to remember.

There are skills I learned myself. Tanning a hide with brains. Or eggs. Stripping sinew for thread to sew a leather pouch or put a pair of gloves together. To obey. When to plant and dig potatoes. When to keep my mouth shut.

No one had money in those days. The land was tired. We did it all to survive. What we couldn't grow, we caught or killed ourselves. The two of us settled here on the west side of the Sangre De Cristos, in a valley full of sagebrush. An occasional juniper. Sand dunes shimmered to the south and jagged, snowy peaks rose above clouds around us. Haunting and beautiful. Nothing like the railroad towns I grew up in back east.

Indians called this place the Bloodless Valley. So sacred they'd cross the mountains and go elsewhere to fight with other tribes.

But times have changed.

Now and then my husband would leave for days on end. Show up smelling like whiskey. And the way I imagined those Alamosa cathouses I'd heard about. Where women spread their legs for loose change or a drink at the bar.

But trouble started before that.

The first time he hit me was on our wedding night. A man's job to keep his wife in line. I'd just wanted him to roll over and hold me after we finished.

As it turned out, we weren't fit to have children and he blamed me for that, too. Until we finally gave up. Which was a relief. He hadn't touched me in years. At least not in the ways that matter.

One of these days I'm not coming back, he would say before leaving for God knows where. One day I'm just gonna go missing. We'll see what you think then.

It was a summer night when I woke up from him strangling me in a dream and decided that the next time he hit me would be the last.

And still, years slipped by.

He kept teaching me. I wouldn't be alive today otherwise. Showed me how to swing an axe. Break ice in the trough so our horses could drink. When he was gone, I split the juniper myself, used his bonesaw to cut firewood into stove-sized pieces. Enough wood and that stove kept me warm all winter. Those embers could burn just about anything. Rancid meat. Bone. It was a good way to get rid of what we couldn't use. As long as I sawed it all into small pieces. Which was easier than burying it or hauling it away.

Of course I'd get lonely sometimes by myself. And scared. Once, before we got the phone, some drifter stopped by looking for work on our place. I think he wanted more than just that. But I talked him into heading to Santa Fe. Said I'd heard there were plenty of jobs down there. My husband was coming back any minute and he could ask him about it if he liked. What I'd really wished before the drifter rode away was to pull the rifle off the wall, show him I wasn't the kind of work he wanted.

But I'd been paralyzed.

I had watched my husband load the gun, cock it, and pull the trigger. I just wasn't sure I'd remember all that when it really mattered. I could've at least pretended I knew what I was doing. Who else was going to protect me? The sheriff and his deputies lived in Del Norte. Forty miles west.

One night my husband showed up after a full week. I was almost out of meat when he stumbled back through the door. His breath hard as turpentine. And I didn't have to ask. Knew he'd gone back to Alamosa.

This time I told him to turn around, leave for good. And he threw a fist in my face. I went down like dead weight as he staggered back out into the yard.

That's when the blood stalled out in my head and something inside me tore away. The last thing I remember is stumbling over to that rifle. Watching my hands grip the barrel. Pull it from the rack. Fingering the trigger, I cocked the hammer on my way out the door.

The next day I saddled the mare and rode high up into the mountains. Had the rifle and a pouch full of bullets. And when I rode back that night, half-frozen and aching with exhaustion, a dead fawn hung over my horse's saddle.

I knew I'd have company soon and they might be as hungry as me.

Back in the cabin, steam rose from my lips. The ash in the wood stove had been cold for hours and inside, the log walls were starting to freeze. My teeth rattled in my skull and I trembled as I began straightening up.

I walked over to the phone and started dialing. The place was in no shape for company, but I sent word to the sheriff that my husband was missing.

I hoped he and his deputies took their time. I needed to start warming the cabin. Sharpening the bonesaw and feeding the stove before anyone came knocking.