

Heterochromia

Riley hopped on the foot-trap and wiggled, using her weight to grind it into the hard earth. When it was level, she stepped off, then scattered pine needles until the metal was hidden beneath a thatch of green. She brushed her hands off on her coat and smiled. Stakes drilled. Bait set. Done. The dark patch glared amid the thin white blanket of last night's snowfall. A death circle. One of three she'd seeded today: the first on the ridge, the second at the riverbed, and now this one, at the foot of Cliff Pretty.

She always made sure to finish at the cliff. It loomed over her, a wide, hodge-podge stack of colored stones, like dyed pancakes. Snow dusted it in heaps, as if the baker had accidentally spilled the confectioner's sugar. It was a mellow stack of pancakes, not too tall and not too steep. Not hard to climb, either, provided you knew your stuff. She'd scaled it plenty of times with Fifty.

He whined. Riley turned to see the white-and-brown husky mix lying next to the trap, head on his paws, that sad puppy-dog look in his eyes. His were two different colors. Brown and blue. Brown for the chocolate lab in him, blue for the husky. Fifty-fifty split. Hence the name.

She remembered the first day she saw those eyes. A month after the car accident, she'd been 'allocated' to her grandparents. She'd never met them before. Their couch had been leather, hard beneath her skirt, and so cold that even the sunlight streaming into the living room hadn't been able to warm away the goosebump-riddled legs. The grandparents, at least, turned out to be much softer, much warmer, than the couch. They gave her space, fed her, took her out into the woods on hiking trips to get her mind off the accident, smiled at her when they thought she needed it. Frowned at her, too, when they thought she needed one of those.

But all that was later. The first indication they were wonderful was Fifty. She'd been sitting on the couch when the warm ball of fur barreled into her, slathering her in wet dog kisses and hot, stinky breath. When she finally managed to catch her breath, it was those two wide, different-colored eyes gazing into hers that made the pain hurt a little bit less.

"Oh, stop it," she said. "Can't I savor the moment? We've been out here all day."

Fifty just stared. His eyes seemed to get more sad, if that were possible.

She sighed. "All right, let's go. You'll get lunch soon enough, you mutt."

After making sure her bow was strapped on tight, she hefted her backpack over her shoulder—much lighter now without the traps—and set off through the snow. Fifty gave a happy bark and followed. He hated sitting still.

"Only two more stops," she said, more to motivate herself than to inform Fifty. This was the hard part. Not the hike, but what lay at the end. Making death circles was easy: the problem

was they really didn't do that much killing. They left that for her. And she, in turn, left that for Grandma. Her job was to scout them.

It took thirty minutes of hiking to get to the first circle. She'd planted it Friday. Two days ago. Almost a guaranteed catch considering the recent surge in the coyote population. Damn things had ravaged the countryside, wiping out rabbits, white-tails, and elks en masse. They'd even taken down a bear cub at some point. She found the body yesterday. Nothing but bones.

Riley trudged up the hill, snow crunching under her boots. The first circle lay just ahead, at the hill's summit, through an L-shaped thicket of elm trees. She sucked in a cold breath. Incline combined with a heavy backpack didn't do her legs any favors. At least the extra hours spent at the high school fitness center was paying off. They were making good time. If grandma came today, Riley doubted they'd have got here before sundown.

When they neared the trees, Fifty shot ahead. "Hey, watch it!" she called to his retreating backside. Her impatient dog's backend disappeared over the hill.

A gust of wind ruffled the tree canopies. It buffeted her with freezing air, blew her hair back, cut her face like winter's fingernails. It brought with it the bitter tang of blood.

"Fifty!" She doubled her pace until she was sprinting up the hill like it was a set of bleachers. Her legs burned. Sweat stung her eyes despite the cold. The trees were close enough to touch now; she turned sideways to slip between two grey trunks. Branches criss-crossed her vision, a web of thick and thin lines. Through them, in the distance, a brown smudge on white. Red surrounded it. She battered aside the branches. Fifty was smart, Fifty was smart—the thought repeated in her head, a mantra, a prayer.

Riley pushed free into a clearing and gasped. It wasn't Fifty caught in the trap, but a coyote. Although, the thing looked more like it had stepped on a landmine than got its foot clamped: both its back legs had been ripped off, along with one of its front ones, so that only its one remaining leg and torso were attached to her trap. The limbs lay scattered around the torso, connected by entrails torn from the coyote's disemboweled stomach. Flies buzzed around the matted fur. There was no head.

Riley gagged, then covered her nose and mouth with her sleeve. It didn't look like an animal anymore. More like a peeled pomegranate. She scanned the folds of white, alert for any sign of what had done this—bear droppings, wolf tracks—but saw nothing.

Branches snapped. Riley dropped to a crouch, ready to run, but relaxed when Fifty burst from the bushes. He circled around the coyote's body and bounded over to her, brown leaves trailing off his coat.

She bent and scratched behind his ears. "Don't scare me like that." Fifty cocked his head, panting. The look on his face seemed to say, "This isn't good."

Riley eyed the dead coyote again, then gave the woods beyond one final look-over. Nothing moved but leaves swaying over snow. "I think we'll call it for the day, buddy." She turned south, towards home, and set off. Fifty followed close behind.

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A corner of her grandparent's house appeared around a bend in the trail. The upper-story glass patio gleamed amid panels of dark wood and metal. The house was a modern mansion at

the outer edge of town, just kissing the wilderness. Far enough to feel isolated without actually being isolated. As Grandpa once said: “I wanted to flirt with the woods, not move in with them.”

Riley squinted. Rays from the afternoon sun gleamed yellow-orange off the patio, setting the house aflame in a swarm of fake fireflies. Through the glare, she thought she could just make out Grandpa’s form on one of the outside chairs.

“Almost there,” she said. Fifty panted beside her, his head low. He must be exhausted; they’d been walking all day. Cliff Pretty and the other traps weren’t too far from the house, but the spot with the coyote’s body was a far trek north. And then they’d had to hike back. Worth the time to place the traps, though: the dead coyote proved that. Although, whatever had killed it might prove a problem later. There had never been a bear or wolves in the area, but if any had roamed in, then caution was necessary. Maybe Grandma would make her use the rifle on these trap-checking missions. The thought tightened her chest.

They reached the bushes bordering the driveway. Grandpa, it turned out, was on the patio. Riley opened her mouth to yell up at him, but before she could, a man appeared in a blur of dark clothes and tackled Grandpa through the glass wall surrounding the patio, sending shards spraying outwards like a flower in bloom.

Grandpa hit the driveway with a thud. The man landed on him a second later.

Riley took a step forward. The man sat up. It was their neighbor—Steve. She thought that was his name. But something was wrong. His complexion was off. It was pasty white, almost yellow, and the veins in his neck and face bulged from his skin a charcoal-grey, as if he’d been pumped with ink.

Steve snarled, lifted his arms up, and brought his fists down hard into the side of Grandpa's head. There was a wet smack. He did it again. Something cracked. Blood sprayed across pavement. Riley ran forward, fell on the curb. The world lurched; gravel dug deep into her palms, shot through with pain.

Before Steve could hit Grandpa again, Fifty barreled into him, sending him sprawling. Riley rolled over and ripped her backpack off. She unstrapped her bow. It was pre-nocked.

Steve got to his feet, his face pinched in rage. Black spittle dribbled down his chin. Fifty growled, his ears flat against his head as he stood tensely in front of Grandpa.

Their neighbor roared and ran forward. Riley whipped her bow up. Released. The arrow struck Steve's neck and he crumpled like a puppet after its strings are cut, collapsing face-first in a heap before Fifty, the arrow shaft snapping beneath him.

Riley bent and pulled another arrow from the quiver strapped to her backpack, then notched it. Aiming it at Steve's head, she stepped forward and kicked him. He didn't move.

Fifty whined. Riley glanced over to see him nudging Grandpa's face with his muzzle. She dropped her bow and hurried to his side, turned him onto his back. Blood, dark and wet, matted his beard and face. One eye was rolled sideways, sucked part-way into its collapsed socket. The other was open. Empty.

Tears broke her vision. She pressed her face to his chest, her sobs muffled by the fabric of his coat. He was dead. The thought repeated, over and over, losing meaning with every cycle, until it seemed just a nonsensical sequence of letters. She squeezed her eyes shut. Any second now, she would wake up in her bedroom upstairs; Grandpa would call her down for breakfast;

she would open her door and the smell of waffles would wash over her, accompanied by the sizzle of bacon and Grandma's off-tune rendition of Skeeter Davis's "The End of the World."

A woman's scream shattered the fantasy. Riley's eyes shot open. Grandma. She pushed herself off Grandpa and grabbed her bow. Fifty was already scratching at the front door. Riley sprinted to it, ripped it open, and stumbled inside. The foyer and game room to her left were empty, but the pool table had been heaved onto its side somehow. Pool sticks littered the tile like twigs, and balls lolled between them, scattered marbles. At the end of the hall, sunlight shone in from the backyard, illuminating the kitchen. The sliding glass door was open; through it, shrubbery was visible, green gnawed grey by winter.

No one ever left the back door open. Riley crept forward. Living room, then upstairs. "Grandma?" she said, low and quiet as she passed the staircase. Shadows darkened the top. Tightening her fingers on the arrow's fletching, she turned into the kitchen. The scent of lemon oil and onions stung her nose. A pot simmered on the stove. Around the island, a cutting board lay on the tile, strewn with chopped vegetables. No Grandma.

A noise came from upstairs. Grandma. Riley hopped up the steps two at a time. At the top, she slowed, then crouched. Over the crest of the topmost stair, at the end of the hall, a dull, repetitive thump whispered from under her grandparent's closed bedroom door.

Riley crept down the hallway, using the long red rug running down the middle to muffle her steps. Fifty's paws clicked behind her. She shot him a look. "You're too loud."

Fifty stopped. He cocked his head at her, but didn't follow.

Her bedroom door was askew to the right. Through it, her bedsheets slumped from the mattress, disheveled and torn, and her bookcase had been toppled against her mirror, splitting it.

Colorful copies of her comic collection littered the carpet. She trained her bow on the doorway as she moved by, alert for a flash of motion; the glint of teeth or black, angry eyes.

The thumping got louder as she approached her grandparent's bedroom. She stepped over the bleach-stain in the wood panel just before their door. It always creaked. Holding her breath, she reached forward and grasped the handle. Its cold stung her palm. She pushed the door open. Beyond, sunlight radiated from the curtained window like an eclipse, while the rest of the room was space without the stars, reducing corners to black holes and furniture to vague lumps.

The thumping came from the bathroom. Soft white light silhouetted a shadowy figure standing behind the door, pounding their fists repeatedly into the clouded glass. Two handprints were smeared down the door's lower half, as if someone had tried to escape but had given up. Or couldn't.

"Grandma?" Riley whispered. Grandma was tough; she'd probably been attacked by one of those things, but locked it inside the bathroom. Maybe she was hiding somewhere. The closet?

Riley approached it—and tripped. Her bow flew from her hands. She landed on her knees with a grunt, then scrambled to where her bow struck the bed and seized it. Bow aimed, she turned and eyed what she'd fallen on.

It was a body. Female, face down, with dark skin and long hair. Riley's heart stuttered. She pushed the body over, then exhaled. It wasn't Grandma, but some other woman—younger, with a crooked nose. Mushroom spores sprouted in little spots around her puffy eyelids.

There was a sound like ice cracking on a frozen pond. Riley looked up to see a series of fractures blossom in the bathroom door. The person behind it continued pounding. The door shook in its frame. It wouldn't last much longer.

Riley pushed herself off the ground and dashed to the closet. She slid the door open. Nothing. Only clothes. Wait. An idea. She stretched, reached up, and ran her hand along the dusty shelf until her fingers found metal. Grandma's rifle.

Riley hated the rifle, but right now, hate didn't matter—not when people had lost their minds and the world had gone to shit. She pulled it down and checked the cartridge. Four-round mag. Should be plenty. After popping the cartridge back in, she chambered a round, then clicked the safety off. Gun ready. Just had to aim and shoot. She stepped back until her legs brushed the bed. She lifted the rifle.

An arm burst through the glass. Riley tensed, pressed the stock tight against her shoulder, and aimed. She pulled the trigger.

A shot boomed, deafening in the small room, knocking the rifle against her shoulder. The round punched a fist-sized hole through the bathroom door, blowing the figure back. Blood stained the marble wall at belly-level behind the broken glass.

Riley clenched her jaw and stepped forward, ears buzzing. Felt like a hive of bees had set up shop inside. Her shoulder hurt like hell, too, but she didn't dare lower the rifle to massage it. Not until she knew the person beyond was done moving.

The bottom frame of the glass was still intact. An agonized gurgling noise wafted out from inside. She peeked over it. Over the frame, the person convulsed. Riley slumped. The rifle slipped from her fingers, thumping to the carpet.

It was Grandma. Her glasses hung askew from her face, pupils dilated as they darted around the ceiling as if searching for something, and her chest heaved up-and-down. She clutched her midsection, her fingers splayed around a tiny, button-sized hole in the stomach of

her flannel shirt. Darkness blossomed in the fabric, then the floor beneath her; a red sea rushing over white tile. There was a heavy, wet wheezing sound, one final sigh, and the convulsions loosened.

She went still.

“I’m sorry.” Riley dropped to her knees. The tears came again, hot and cutting. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want to shoot you.” Glass twinkled around Grandma’s body, gouging a memory forward; the twinkle became the glint of a rabbit’s eye beneath her.

Here, Riley, Grandma said, handing her the rifle. Fall had exhaled pumpkin-scented breath over the land around them, tipping the trees shades of red and gold. The late-afternoon sky was a burnished rust above. Beneath her feet, a rabbit squirmed in the trap, its coat dusted the same grey as the twigs it was trapped on. It had big, black eyes, glossy with terror. Riley hefted the rifle. Aim for the head, Grandma said. You don’t want to ruin the meat. Riley knew they had to kill it. It was a pest, Grandma had told her that morning; the bramble was overflowing with them. Riley’s finger brushed the trigger. All she had to do was squeeze it. Three pounds of pressure and the rabbit would die. The problem with that, however, was the rabbit would die. The moment stretched, Grandma silent beside her, waiting. Her hands shook. The trigger felt cold. Three pounds. So little, but in reality a boulder’s weight. Riley lowered the rifle. She couldn’t do it. Grandma took it from her. It’s okay, Riley, she said, killing isn’t for everybody. She hefted the rifle, aimed, and squeezed—

Fifty growled, pulling Riley back to the present. She looked up, sniffing. Grandma was climbing to her feet, and she didn’t look dead anymore. A scream peeled from her open mouth as she stepped forward through the glass, her eyes narrowed.

Riley ran. She sprinted from the room, across the hall, down the stairs, boots thundering on wood. She couldn't shoot her. Not again. Running was better. She flew through the front door into the yard. The wind swept against her face, a soft caress. Grandpa lay next to Steve. She ignored them. Where should she go—where was there *to go*?

Grandma's scream drifted from inside the house. Another scream matched it—this time from the road to her right. A man was coming at her from the side of Grandpa's truck.

She aimed the rifle at him. "Stop!"

He didn't listen.

"I'll shoot you if you don't stop." She whipped the rifle to a second man stumbling around the other side. A third was on the road behind him. Fifty growled as Grandma appeared in the doorway. That made four total. She only had three shots.

Riley lowered the rifle and sprinted into the forest. Fifty bounded beside her. Twigs snapped; the wind whipped against her face. Her backpack dug into her shoulder blades. An Atlas stone. She yanked her arms from its straps, flung it into the trees, and kept running. The people were just behind, their screams and thudding footfalls trailing her like the breeze. She sucked air into her starving lungs. There didn't seem to be enough.

The trees tilted as she stumbled down a snowy slope. They needed a plan.

Cliff Pretty! It wasn't far; she could see a glimpse of it through the trees. Fifty could climb it too. They could knock the people back if they tried to follow. Riley cut right, planted her hand on a log, and swung over. Fifty hopped across next. She glanced behind her. The people had just reached the slope. A line of them ran down the hill, at least five or six in number. Grandma's red flannel flashed in the beeline of bodies.

Riley ran faster. Her breath left her mouth in ragged gasps. Fifty's panting was heavy and loud beside her. The cliff was close; the base appeared ahead. A cramp tore through her side. Pain. Fire. It didn't matter. They were almost there. The cliff loomed just ahead. Forty feet away. Thirty. Twenty. Ten—

Snap. Fifty howled behind her. Riley turned. He lay in the snow, his front foot caught in something.

The coyote trap.

Riley sprinted to him, skidding to her knees. Fifty whined. Blood stained his foot red. He'd been moving too fast when the metal clamped shut, so it jerked him to a brutal stop. With shaking hands, she reached down and tried to press the release levers, but her fingers were too cold, too weak. Gritting her teeth, she tried again, forcefully, until the trap shook in her hands like a ragdoll.

It must've spooked Fifty because he bit her. She cried out, yanking her hand free from his teeth in a tear of skin. Blood welled in warm rivets across the bite marks. She pressed her hand between her legs, tears welling up like the blood. Through her blurry vision, shapes flickered in the trees. Human coyotes. Hunting.

Riley extended her hand but Fifty growled. "Please, boy. Please. I have to get it off you. I have to." Her voice broke. She reached forward again, her hand throbbing. Fifty snapped at her, forcing her back.

The people were close enough she could hear their enraged howls, the stomping of their feet, the crunch of snow as they twisted through leaves and branches. The sounds swelled until

they were a roar in Riley's ears, a fury-filled chant. A promise of death. Impending. Inevitable. There was no time to get Fifty's paw free. The realization hit her like the car did six years ago.

A sob escaped her mouth. She hefted the rifle. Time slowed. Screams dulled to whispers. Around her, the swaying leaves seemed to shift color, tinting grey to red, white to yellow. A pair of brown-and-blue eyes, glossy with pain, met hers. Her finger brushed the trigger. Three pounds of pressure. So little. So much.

The gun kicked in her hands.

The world split. Fragments. People roaring behind her; a cold couch warmed by fur, a wet tongue licking her face; hand-over-hand, gasping, up stacks of pancakes, hard and snowy; rock scuffing elbows and knees, drawing blood; tears; Grandpa sleeping in the driveway; a rabbit; an aching hand that hurt more than the empty house and the hole in her chest.

Riley crested the final rock. She hoisted herself up and turned until she sat on the cliff's edge. Bodies were congregated around a white-and-brown speck below. Ripping, tearing.

She watched them do it. She watched until there was nothing left. She watched because it was the only thing she'd ever done, and because it was all she could do. She watched until the wind chilled the last of her tears to an afterthought.

There wouldn't be any more.