

Choices

By Sue Denver

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Cynthia Hare ducked into the alley behind East C Street and leaned against the wall gasping for air. Her long, black hair was pasted to her face and she cradled her left arm. She was pretty sure Winston had broken it.

She wanted to sit down and cry, but the smell was really awful. Somebody had peed here. Or more. And she didn't want to think about what could be in the trash she was standing in. It was mid-summer in Pueblo, Colorado, and the night had barely cooled from the 100+ day.

It was time, she decided. Time to give up on Johnny, no matter how much she loved him. Time to call her eight-year marriage quits and go home to Lupiti, Oklahoma, and her tribe. Take her two babies with her before Johnny's drinking could leave them at risk too.

She squatted down on her heels and brushed away the tears sliding down her cheeks. She had loved him so. The first years had been wonderful. Sure, they had little money. But most people in Pueblo were scraping by. She'd got her LPN last year, so she had steady work at the Mental Health Institute. Johnny made decent money in maintenance at the airport.

Then COVID happened. All the death she saw. All the fear. The terror of maybe bringing it home to her babies. Maybe it had changed her. Maybe she wasn't as attentive to him? Maybe, maybe, maybe.

Johnny lost his job when most people stopped flying. He couldn't find another though he really looked hard.

Then he started drinking. Worse, he started hanging out in bars with Winston. That man was mean as a snake under a good-ole-boy skin. He had some money; dressed like a big shot. Johnny looked up to him for god only knows why.

Winston made her skin crawl. He watched her when he came by to drag Johnny off for another night of drinking. He kept "accidentally" touching her. This time, when she told him to back off, he twisted her arm until she heard something snap.

She shook off the tears and stood up. Another 30 minutes or so — to make sure Winston and Johnny were gone.

She'd go home, grab the babies and whatever she could cram into her Chevy Spark, and head for Oklahoma. They needed nurses there, too. She could survive.

Footsteps scrapped gravel. Nearby. Cynthia stood up. Johnny came around the corner.

"There you are," he said, weaving slightly. "Why the hell did you run away?"

"You were going to pass out. And leave me with Winston."

"You never liked my friends. Gotta right to hang out with friends."

She shook her head. "I'm leaving, Johnny. Going home to Lupiti. You don't listen to me anymore." She started to walk past him, when Johnny grabbed her broken arm.

She screamed in pain, and Johnny dropped her arm. He looked confused.

Then his eyes focused behind her and got very big.

Cynthia turned and looked back down the alley. A woman was strolling towards them. Tall-ish. Lanky. Striking — with a shag of dark brown hair caressing her face. There was something about her... An eagle feather hung from one ear. And was that? Yes, a medicine bundle was hanging around her neck.

"Your family was worried about you, Cynthia," the woman said, her voice soft and low. But those eyes never left Johnny's.

She walked straight to him, put her right hand splayed on his chest and pushed him back against the wall.

"Johnny Hare," she said. "You've lost your way."

Johnny felt frozen, looking into golden eyes that looked like they'd captured the sun in them. In barely a whisper, he asked, "Are you Red-Woman?"

A ghost of a smile flitted across the woman's face. "No," she said. "I'm Skiri. And this is your warning. You are not to see your wife again until you have been sober for at least a month."

He blinked. "You're no wolf. And I'll see my wife whenever I damn well want to."

Johnny pushed forward from the wall, pushed hard against her hand. Then sharp pain stopped him. He looked down and saw her hand had become a paw — with four very sharp

claws currently digging through his shirt and into his flesh. A paw where her hand had been. A paw which was still attached to her very human arm.

“Do you agree with these conditions?” she asked. Calmly as though they were just chatting.

Johnny’s mouth was hanging open and his eyes were frozen on the paw. The woman’s other hand went under his chin, closed his jaw, and tilted his face up to look at her.

“Do you agree?”

Johnny nodded, over and over. “Yes,” he said.

The woman turned to Cynthia. “Go home to your family. Johnny will come when he’s ready.”

But Cynthia saw movement behind the woman and screamed “No!” Winston had come around the corner, knife in hand. He stabbed it into the woman’s back.

“Leave, now!” She said to Cynthia and Johnny. “Now!” They both ran.

“Hello, Winston,” she said.

Winston laughed. “You might scare them with indian bullshit, but not me.”

“So you stabbed me in the back. What’s your plan now?”

“Finish you off, bitch. Face-to-face.”

The woman smiled. “Oh good. I hoped you’d say that.”

And then she transformed, snout and teeth first.

End