



“Wild Coyote” by Presley Boschert
1st Place, Short Story 16-18

“Wild Coyote”

I'd been watching the same town square at the same time, every day, for seven years.

There's only so many times the human mind can watch the view out of its bedroom window before getting bored. There's only so many times fifteen-year-old me would have listened to aunties gossiping, children crying, the other girls *laughing*. What did they do for their fathers to let them outside? What made them so *special*, so *strong* that they could just... walk out in plain daylight.

You wouldn't remember St. Terrace, Missouri. None of the outsiders, save for the Memengwa family, does. Of course, we used to be part of your world. Until Christmas Eve, 1982, when the earth split open with a wet, mossy crack, and the black poplars grew up around us like weeds. Folks finally noticed on New Year's Day that the mayor's family hadn't left their house, and the glowing eyes from between the trees weren't the stray cats. Not anymore, at least.

I'd been born after all that mess—May 28, 2007 in my Mama's barn, a yard from the nearest horse stall and howling like a coyote. My dad, who used to be a semi-decent preacher and an even more average cow herder, always said he found me alone and already playing with the barn mice, a country girl from the very start.

So why he cooped me up in this church tower for years, I'll never get. I came in covered in animal blood all the time back then—it's part of the job. I don't remember what made him suddenly throw a fit.

I sat on my bed, eyes still staring out the hole where the tiny, green stained glass window used to be (relax, I just took it out of the frame), fingers digging into the claw-like grooves on my bed frame. The clear sky and the four-winged ravens on the

bank's roof didn't matter, because here, you got used to them. The gouges in the wood of my bed mattered.

"They're proof," the little devil in my ear whispered, *"you're not as harmless as he thinks."*

"You wouldn't do anything to your father," my human brain urged.

"You're not just out for kicks. You're not a little girl sneaking out to meet a boy. You're out for blood."

I hadn't met too many folks outside my dad and the pictures of dearly deceased Mama, but human nails didn't look sharp enough to carve wood like I did. Mine didn't even look long enough. But I'd raked my nails across my bed, tired of listening to other people's lives from my bedroom window, and if he'd just let me out *I could show him*.

I poked at my dinner that night. Distantly, I knew I should've been hungry. With autumn falling and the sun setting earlier each evening, we'd stack broken furniture in front of the doors to the outside, which should've worked up an appetite.

I should've felt safer with the woods kept out.

I'm not the type of gal to waste time, so I told my dad, "I want to leave."

He sighed, like he always did, and shook his head. "I've told you a million times, Persephone, it's too dangerous out there," and he pulled down his shirt collar to reveal the lightning crack of white scar across his neck, like he always did. "How many times have we gone over this? If this'd happened to you, you'da bled out. I can't let my little girl out there."

I hissed, "Why d'you even keep me in here? I went foolin' around with the dogs all the time back then—*what changed?*"

"You changed, sephy," he spoke like he was ending the conversation. "You got into something you shouldn't have, and I thought you'd go the way of your Mama if you kept gettin' out."

I popped like a firecracker, blood boiling and eyes seeing more red than a bull. "*What did I do?*" I howled. I stood up so fast my chair toppled over behind me, crashing to the dirty floor. My fingers flexed into a clawed hand and before my dad could speak, I raked my nails across the dining room table. With a scream of ripping wood, I left four long gashes in the pine.

My dad stared at me like I was a wild coyote. *Good.*

My breath heaved. My eyes bulged from their sockets. "I won't ask again," I spat, "What did an *eight year old* do to deserve this?"

"You think that'll protect you?" my dad whispered. "You think the devil will protect you? I keep you up here for—"

"--I haven't left this church in seven years! I haven't met another person in seven! Years!"

"You don't need to!" He brought out his booming preacher's voice. "You think there are good things out there for you? You think God has intended for you to join their filth?"

He'd already dragged out the preacher's voice from his past. By the power vested in my claws, I wouldn't let him treat me like the cows he used to herd.

At night, the town square... was empty. I stood alone, as alone and bloody as the day of my birth, the church door swinging open behind me. Flickering light and the pained groans of my father bled from the gaping doorway. The air smelled as sweet and cold as plums.

You wouldn't remember St. Terrace, Missouri. Since 1982, we technically haven't existed. To *you*. To outsiders. Nowadays, we live in a pocket of small town lined by woods we can't escape. Monsters and cryptids watch us from the dark, waiting until nightfall to feast.

I'm beginning to think I'm one of them.

Word Count: 953