

Bow Grip

Ivan E. Coyote

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BOW GRIP

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*This book is dedicated to the men in my family.
Especially you, Dad.*

I would never have sold him the car in the first place if I'd known what he was going to do with it.

I'd seen him around town a couple of times, once or twice at the café, just drinking coffee, no cream, no sugar, never eating anything, and now and then at Ida's little grocery store, buying crackers and tins of oysters and canned soup, you know, bachelor stuff. I should know.

Once or twice I'd seen him thumbing a ride on the highway, always when I was going the other way, not that I'd have picked him up necessarily, since I've usually got the big dog in the front seat with me, shedding and generally leaving no room for another passenger, something Allyson always used to complain about, before she left. I guess I pretty much inherited my dad's disdain for hitchhikers, and on top of that, I had heard nothing but no good about the guy, if you can believe what you hear around town. My buddy Rick Davis nicknamed him the cowboy, kind of sarcastic-like on account of the straw hat he wears everywhere, combined with his apparent lack of a horse to go with it. Anyways, the cowboy isn't much liked by the guys I play hockey or poker with, nobody trusts him. Rick says it's because the guy doesn't appear to have regular employment and he lives alone in a school bus. I always secretly thought he was unpopular because he's quite good-looking, or so the ladies tell me, and a bunch of paunchy poker players with receding hairlines probably never take too well to an unattached man showing up in town. Nobody invited Nick the

new dentist over for dinner for years, until he imported that blonde nurse from Edmonton and properly married her and moved her piano in. Now he's one of the guys, like he's been here in Drumheller forever, just like the rest of us.

I realized when the cowboy came into the shop last month and inquired about the Volvo that I'd never heard him talk out loud at all before that. Not very friendly of me, when you think about it. He's been living out at Archie's farm for going on three years by now, easy, and I guess I've never even said a proper good day to the man.

"Name is Carson. James or Jim. People call me both. Saw the car for sale out front."

His long-fingered paw appeared in the sideways rectangle of light between the concrete and the underbelly of Betty Makerewich's Taurus wagon. I was on my back underneath it, on the dolly, since Franco was using the hoist. I rolled out to shake James or Jim Carson's hand.

"Saw the car out front," he repeated. I didn't so much mind someone getting straight to the point like that. No small talk with this guy, that was plain to see. Some folks just don't like messing around with the idle chatter. There's been days I wished Franco was more like that. I got right to it. I wiped my greasy hand on the thigh of my coveralls and shook hands with him for the first time. His grip was firm, but not one of those look-how-tough-I-am handshakes, the ones that feel like foreplay to a fist fight. Just a decent hello.

"The Volvo," I told him. "Came in on a trade for some work I did. Used to belong to Donny Nolan's oldest daughter. He bought it brand new for her eleven years ago. Single owner, lady-driven. Couple hundred and twenty thousand clicks on it though, from when she was going to film school

in Winnipeg, but someone took care of it, for sure, it's still in fine shape. Solid. I'm thinking I want thirty-eight hundred. I rebuilt the carburetor and replaced the head gasket. New battery. Good little car. Lots of rubber left on the tires, too."

We walked out the open bay doors to the asphalt yard in front of the shop, towards the blue Volvo. He didn't stop to kick the tires or open the hood; instead, he opened the driver's side door and folded his long frame inside the leather interior. He ran his palms over the steering wheel, wiggled the gearshift. He had a good four or five inches on me, and he slid the seat back to make room for his legs, and surveyed either himself or the empty back seat in the rear-view, hard to tell from where I was standing.

"You want to take it for a spin?"

He appeared not to hear my question. "Thirty-eight hundred you want? Would you consider a trade?"

I shook my head. "Like I said, I already took it on a trade in the first place. Got to keep the cash flow going somehow."

I had done a lot of work for trades over the years. In a town mostly populated by farmers, ranchers, and hunters, I was often offered things other than money in exchange for fixing up something or other for someone. Too bad I couldn't buy new parts or pay the electric bill with frozen deer meat or cords of firewood. Franco only worked for cash, too.

"Don't have the cash," the cowboy said, his hands still on the steering wheel, ten o'clock and two o'clock, as my dad had once taught me, years and years ago.

"You could talk to the bank then, see about a small loan?" I raised the end of my sentence in a half-hearted question. I knew the guy didn't have a real job. He had built

a more than decent deck and fence for Mrs Baker when she got her insurance money, and he helped out at Archie's farm, where he kept his school bus parked, but I didn't think the bank would like him much for a loan.

"Don't have the time. I need the car right now. I need the car tomorrow."

"Well, what do you have to trade for it?" I was hoping it was something I already had or didn't need, so I could say no to him with no hard feelings. Business is business.

"A handmade cello."

"Beg your pardon?"

"A cello. The instrument. You play it with a bow, like a violin, but it's a lot bigger. It's a beautiful piece of work, worth a helluva lot more than thirty-eight hundred dollars. More like five or six. Thousand."

"I don't play an instrument. Never had the knack. Tried playing trumpet in high school. Never took to it."

"Strings are different than brass." He pulled a half-flattened pack of Player's from his jean jacket and pushed the Volvo's cigarette lighter in with a wide thumb. "Much more emotive. You should think about it. A new hobby. Something to fill the time, since your wife left. This car needs a new cigarette lighter."

I took one step back. I thought about being pissed off that this guy who I hardly knew was bringing my private life up into a conversation regarding a used car, but then I remembered what my mom had said to me not the very night before. I had come home from walking Buck Buck to find her sitting on my back porch, a Saran Wrap-covered meatloaf steaming up on the stairs beside her rump.

"There you are," she had said, hauling herself to her feet. "Take this. Your sister and I have been talking about

you recently. We worry. We think you need a hobby. You need to move on. You need to clean up Ally's office, and pack up the last of her stuff and send it on to Calgary. She's not coming back, Joseph. Time you faced facts. Got on with things. Get yourself a diary, or build something in your shop, whatever. I'm off to bingo. You need a haircut."

I decided on the spot to trade the guy for the cello. The car had had a For Sale sign in its windshield for six weeks now, with no one showing more than a passing interest in even test-driving it. I could buy myself a new hobby, I figured, and get my mom and Sarah off my case for a bit. All it would cost me was the work and parts I'd already put in to Nolan's tractor, and the labour I had put into the Volvo. I still didn't like the guy bringing my wife's whereabouts up in casual conversation, but I didn't have to like him to do business. The car could sit there for months; I was a mechanic, not a salesman. Instruments were expensive, I knew, because Rick Davis was always bitching about still making the payments on his oldest son's baritone saxophone, and the kid graduated already last June. Five thousand bucks was a lot of cello.

I shook the cowboy's hand for the second and last time. "Bring the thing around tomorrow, I've got the transfer papers for the car in my desk. I'll be here anytime past seven-thirty. You want to take it for a spin then?"

He shook his head, and lit a squished smoke with a silver flip of his Zippo. "I'll take your word that it runs just fine."

Normally I would have mentioned there was no smoking in the vehicle, but I figured, what the fuck? The car was his now, after all, he could smoke in it all he wanted. I never smoke in my own truck, but only on account of the dog.

James or Jim Carson refused my offer of a cup of coffee, saying he had business to attend to and he'd be back in the morning, first thing. I dug out a set of transfer papers, unplugged the open sign, and locked up.

The sun was still working its way over the horizon as I walked the three blocks from my place to the shop the next morning. The lights were on in the office already, and the open sign had been plugged in. The Volvo was gone.

Franco was in his chair drinking coffee on the other side of my desk. The cello was in a black case in the corner, taking up too much room, polished and out of place next to the dusty coffee maker and the wall of calendars, ancient and new. The seller's copies of the transfer papers were in a neat pile in the centre of my desk. Buck Buck circled the rest of the floor, uncertain where he was going to lie down now that the space beside the heater was occupied.

I picked up the cello and stashed it in the closet with the broom and the spare printer paper.

"The guy that lives in that old bus at Archie's place was here half an hour ago," Franco said, flipping the page of his newspaper. "I tried to call you but you must have been walking the beast." He eyed me sideways from his duct-taped rolling chair. "Couldn't see you needing a cello, no offense, but the guy was fairly adamant that you two had made a deal. Seemed too weird not to be true, if you know what I mean. He filled out the papers, and I forged your bit for you, so he could take the car. Said he was in a hurry."

"Thanks, Franco." I poured myself a cup of coffee and added one cube of sugar, stirred it with the pen from my shirt pocket.

"Since when do you need a cello more than you need a perfectly good car?"

I took a slow breath. Like I said, Franco talks too much sometimes.

"Thought I'd get myself a new hobby."

"You don't even whistle."

"A guy can't try something new every once in a while?"

"You listen to all-news radio. I never heard you play so much as the stereo. I never took you for the musical type, is all."

"I don't know if I am the musical type, but my mom is on my case to get a hobby, and the man needed a car, so I took the goddamned cello. Now everyone can be happy. Maybe I'll be good. Maybe I'll be Alberta's next Ashley MacIssac."

"He's from the Maritimes. And he plays fiddle. Not to mention he's a flamer." Franco's eyes dropped and I watched the red creep up into his stubbled face. "I'm sorry, Joey."

"Don't apologize to me, Franco." I knew what he was thinking. He was thinking about Allyson, living with another woman in Calgary. He was thinking he had sideways insulted my wife, the lesbian, by calling Ashley MacIssac a flamer. I was getting sick of everybody bringing up my private life as though it were the hockey scores or current events. Even a guy with no phone living on a bus on a farm twenty minutes outside of town had heard all about where my wife had gone and with whom. That could be partly due to who she had left town with. Kathleen Sawyer. Mitch Sawyer owns the Esso on Fourth Avenue, and his wife had been a fairly quiet kindergarten teacher, not much to gossip about at all, until her and Allyson both broke the news to Mitch and me on the same night.

That was a little over a year ago now, and ever since then Mitch has spent at least three nights a week in the

lounge of the Capitol Hotel, telling anyone who will sit for a beer with him all about his wife and my wife and their one-bedroom artist's loft in Calgary.

Mitch Sawyer seems to feel that the fact Kathleen left him for another woman is more binge- and sympathy-worthy than if she'd just run off with his brother or the postman, but I guess I don't really see it that way. My wife of five years has left me, and I pretty much don't care who she went with, all I know is that she's gone, and it's been about twelve and a half months now of looking like she isn't coming back. Drinking doesn't seem to help much either, so mostly I try and just avoid running into Mitch Sawyer. I like the Mohawk gas better, anyways, higher octane, plus they got the video rental counter right there in the gas station. I've been watching a lot of movies lately.

I changed the subject by grabbing the clipboard with the work orders off the nail beside the door. "You want to pull a rad on the F-150, or you want to do the transmission in the Subaru?"

"You pissed off at me, Joey? I think it's great you got a cello to learn to play. Take your mind off things."

"My mind is my business, Franco."

"I only say it because you're like family. I told your father I would look after you."

"You told him no such thing. My father thought everyone should look after himself."

"Your father thought a lot of things. You forget, I knew him before there was you. He was like a brother to me. He wasn't like you. Your father, you could carry on a conversation with. He always said you had the insides of your head sewn up like a baseball. Could never figure what you were thinking about."

"Transmission or radiator, Franco?"

"You should loosen up, Joey. You'll end up with that prostrate cancer, like what happened with Archie's little brother. The stress."

"Transmission it is, then." It was eight o'clock. I turned the volume on the news way up, popped the hood on the Ford, and didn't speak to Franco again until we stopped working four hours later. We took our coveralls off and headed over to the café for a bite. Neither of us had gotten around to packing a lunch.

All through my beef dip, the only thing Franco talked about was fishing. No comments regarding wives, his or mine. Franco's wife Claudia had left him thirty years ago, because of the drinking. I remember the whole thing, it happened the summer I turned ten. It was 1974, Richard Nixon was resigning as the President of the United States, they showed us a traumatic video about nuclear war in the gymnasium on the second last day of school, and Franco's wife took the kids and moved into her sister's basement suite. Franco stayed on the pull-out couch in the sewing room at our place for three months. It was just before he came to work for my father. But Franco has never talked about Claudia with me, even when Allyson first left, and I'm not the type to bring things up. Franco talks about women a lot, but never Claudia.

Franco didn't mention Allyson, my new hobby, or my stress levels either. All through lunch he just went on about fishing. Just the same old stories about the ones that got away.

That night I dragged the cello home and laid it down on the loveseat next to the front window in the living room, where Ally used to lay and read on rainy days. I opened

the case. Inside, it smelled like an attic, or an old suitcase. The wood was deep red-brown and glowing. James or Jim had shined her up nice for me. There was also a soft rag, a bow with a sweat-worn handle, and a small tin of wax. I didn't take the cello out, just sat for a bit and stared at it. I'd have to get an instruction book out of the library. I reached over and plucked the thickest string. The body of the cello hummed a cement foundation of a note until I placed my hand on it. It felt warm, like a living thing. Like it could breathe on its own, if I could figure how to get it started.

I closed the case and walked into Allyson's office. Her desk was still there, a third-hand solid oak number I had found for her on our first anniversary. There was still a coffee cup sitting on the desk's faded top, the remains of its contents now dried like varnish on its bottom and sides. The cup was orange, Allyson's favourite colour. It had lime green and lemon-coloured flowers on it, like from the seventies. I think it used to belong to my parents. I think we once had the whole set. Ally had probably scooped it from Mom and Sarah's pile of yard sale stuff, when my mom bought the new set from the IKEA in Calgary. Ally loved old stuff. The first real fight we ever had was over the kitchen appliances, when we first bought this place. She loved the Harvest Gold fridge and stove set. My mom thought they were hideous and had to go. I didn't really care either way, they still both worked fine, but I let my mom talk me into thinking we needed a new stainless steel set, and that Ally would love it. I thought Ally would be pleasantly surprised, but instead she wouldn't even let me unload them out of the back of my truck. It hadn't even occurred to me that she would prefer Harvest Gold to stainless steel.

I ended up sitting through a serious lecture about how

it was unhealthy for a grown man to let his mother make decisions for him, and how I was married now and that meant it was my wife's job to tell me what colour the stove was going to be, not to mention that buying new stuff when the old things weren't broken was exactly what would eventually turn the planet into one big toxic landfill, and so on. We ended up cutting a deal. I took the new fridge and stove back the next day, but we got Rick Davis to come put a new hardwood floor in the front room, in place of the orange and brown shag that Ally claimed to love. The guy at the Sears laughed at me when I showed up again the very next morning to return the new fridge and stove, explaining that my wife was attached to the old stuff. He asked me if my wife was from the city, because the vintage look was all the rage these days in Toronto, even Calgary now. Then he tried to sell me a brand new fridge and stove that was built to look old already, from a catalogue. Ally really laughed when I told her that bit later. Said it was painfully ironic, didn't I think? What Ally doesn't know is that the old Harvest Gold stove finally kicked the bucket not a week after she split, and now I have a brand spanking new stainless steel range, right next to the old gold fridge. I still owe Rick Davis free oil changes for a year yet, in trade for part of the labour from him putting in the new floor five years ago, and he's still bitching about paying good money for a baritone saxophone collecting dust in the basement because his fucking kid decided to study political science in college instead. Meanwhile, I'm the only divorced guy around these parts who doesn't have a built-in ice cube maker. Painfully ironic, you bet.

I took the dried-out coffee cup and put it to soak in the sink, cracked a cold one, and went in to the garage. I dug out

two plastic bins, emptied out the camping gear inside them onto a shelf, and took the bins into Ally's office. I started packing up her remaining books: mostly school stuff, paleontology, some Jung, and a few novels. Books on gardening, pottery, and beekeeping. She had wanted to keep bees one day, when we sold this place and bought something bigger, farther out of town, somewhere on a lake. We both had a thing about swimming in lakes. Ally had already taken all the cookbooks from the cupboard in the kitchen. She once told me when we first got together, before we even moved in, that she never went anywhere without her cookbooks. She had kept her word about that bit.

The books filled one bin to the top, and three-quarters of another. I took a breath and opened the top right drawer of her desk. I had never even sat down at Ally's desk since I gave it to her, just like she would never have touched anything on my workbench in the garage, or opened mail with only my name on it. It was one of the things about Ally and me that I had always appreciated, that we still had private spaces and lives. No rules or hassles about it, we just fell into things that way. We were both just naturally private people. Not like some couples get. Until she popped the news to me about her and Kathleen Sawyer, of course. That was the first time that her privacy turned itself into a secret, right before my ears.

But my mom was right, Ally wasn't coming home, and besides, she might need some of this stuff in Calgary. She had been pretty busy with school, kept saying she was going to come back for the rest of her belongings, but never seemed to be able to get away from the city. I hadn't been able to bear the thought of this room being empty, and the house feeling definitely too big for one guy, plus I always felt

like sending her stuff might seem to her like I didn't want her back, if something didn't work out for her and Kathleen and she ever wanted to come home.

Mitch Sawyer had sold Kathleen's canoe and given her mountain bike away out of spite, to another teacher that Kathleen hated. He told me all this, not two weeks after they had left, like I would be proud of him. Like I said, I mostly try to avoid the guy, except for hockey, where I can't help it. Can't start kicking guys out of the league for being underhanded with their ex-wives, or there might not be enough bodies for a decent game.

The top right drawer contained only pens and pencils and what looked like the charger for her laptop. The bottom drawer was full of files, school stuff like old essays and quizzes, all stacked in no apparent order, just like most of Ally's papers always were. At the very bottom of the drawer was a framed certificate. I wasn't snooping, really, but when I was putting it in the bin I couldn't help but notice that it was a Master's degree, dated 2002, more than a year before Ally had left. Three years into our marriage. In her maiden name, not the hyphenated version Franco had always hassled me about. It was from the University of Alberta, in Edmonton.

I sat back on my heels and thought about the half-pack of stale Player's Lights I kept in the junk drawer in the kitchen. I had been trying to quit, with limited success. But for some reason my wife had apparently spent at least a couple of years of our marriage going back to school and getting her Master's degree in dinosaur bones without ever mentioning it to me, and I suddenly needed a smoke something terrible.

I packed up the rest of her stuff without really looking

at anything, chain-smoking all the while. I dragged the bins out to the garage and heaved them onto the shelf next to the loose camping gear. Then I tripped over the snow shovel, cracked my shin, and cursed all the way back to the fridge for another beer. I parked my ass on the chair in the front room, and turned on the television.

It was just after nine o'clock. I flipped through a rerun of *Law and Order*, past channel after channel of the American election debate, and finally landed on a movie. It was about this woman who was dating two guys at the same time, the one guy was a nice, respectable blue-collar type that her mother wanted her to marry because he was from a good family in the neighbourhood, and the other was a red-wine-drinking writer, a rascal that nobody but the lady approved of. She stands up the nice guy, choosing instead to try and hook up with the drunken writer, because he is of course the guy she is hot for. And the nice guy, he's moping around at home hoping she'll eventually show up. She does, but only after the writer guy acts like a total prick and breaks her heart, and only so her mom won't freak out on her about what was she supposed to tell the nice guy's mother, who was a friend of the family and went to the same temple and all.

I was just about to grab the remote and change the channel, as the plot seemed unlikely to move towards a car chase or even any gunplay or explosions, which is mostly what I was in the mood for, when the nice guy asks the woman if she would dance with him in his kitchen, with the flowers on the table and the volume on the radio turned way up.

I remembered that Allyson used to tell the story of how she knew she loved me by the way she felt the first time she

saw me dancing in a kitchen. She figured she could settle down with a kitchen dancer.

I put down the remote.

It happened at my little sister Sarah's thirtieth birthday party, in her and her husband Jean-Paul's kitchen. It was the year before Dad died, Ally and I had been dating for about six months, and this was her first full-on family experience. Jean-Paul had bought Sarah this fancy new CD player unit with detachable speakers, the tabletop kind of model. But it cranked up pretty good and Sarah put on Cat Stevens' "Peace Train." My niece Chelsea was about eight, I guess, and she grabbed my hands and stood on my feet for me to dance around the kitchen with her. Then I danced with Sarah and Chelsea both for a bit, until Chelsea's two little buddies jumped on me, and I had to stop because I nearly threw my back out again.

So the nice guy and the woman are dancing in the kitchen together, and she's having a fairly good time in spite of herself. But she keeps smelling vanilla, she thinks. Finally, she breaks down and asks the guy is that vanilla she smells, because he's the kind of guy she can just talk to about any old thing, and the guy gets all embarrassed. He tells her the odor is coming from him, because his family owned a pickle factory, so his hands usually smelled of vinegar and pickling salts and garlic and whatnot, not very romantic stuff, and his dad had told him that when he had a date with a girl he really liked, he should soak his hands after work in warm milk and vanilla. It was the only thing that could kill the pickle smell, plus the milk would make your hands softer, his dad had told him, in the event you should be lucky enough that the girl lets you touch her.

The guy is explaining all this to the woman, and for

some reason suddenly the tears are pouring over my bottom lids and streaming down my face, down my neck, into my collar. I don't remember what happened in the movie after that, or how it ended.

What I remember is crying that night in my chair, even letting myself make noises out loud, outside of my body. Crying harder than I did when our first dog, Buck, had the run-in with the porcupine and we had to put him down the day after Boxing Day. Harder than I cried the morning Ally left town in the passenger seat of Mitch Sawyer's new truck. They left Mitch with the minivan, for the kids. I cried harder and longer and louder than ever.

I woke up with what felt like sand in my eyes, still in the armchair, with the coloured bars on the TV glowing and humming in the dark. I lifted the lid on the cello to look at it, then latched it shut, and went straight to bed.

I dreamt of nothing, and woke up an hour before my alarm went off. I washed the lone coffee cup in the sink, noting that it meant I hadn't eaten anything at all for dinner the night before, shaved three days off my face, and took Buck Buck for an extra long walk before we headed to the shop. I even managed to beat Franco there, which he hated. Franco could sit sometimes for an hour and a half in the office in the morning without lifting a finger to get anything actually accomplished, but as long as he got there before I did, he figured he was still showing me what work looked like. I wouldn't mind so much if he made better coffee.

I put on a pot of strong stuff, swept the floor, and read almost the entire paper before it was time to plug in the open sign. Franco showed up just before seven-thirty, clean-shaven and reeking of cologne still, a sure sign he had gone out to the bar last night after broomball and got drunk, or lucky, or maybe both.

He started in before the bells on the front door had even stopped jingling.

"You're early. Hey, you know that substitute teacher from the French school? The one from Montreal? Ten minutes ago she was sitting in my lap, feeding me fruit with her fingers. What a night."

I flipped the page on my newspaper. Said nothing.

He stared through his eyebrows at me, and made for the coffee pot. "You look tired. Hungover? Jesus, Joey, I could polish my boots with this. Look, there's oil floating around on top of the coffee you made."