

## A Fox in the Chicken House

Chapter One of "As Good As Gone" by Kathryn Lord

The first drops of blood glisten bright red against the immaculate white of the snow. Next come burnished scarlet-gold feathers, crumpled and broken. Barely dawn, the skim milk sun trickles through the spruces. The air is cheek-bitingly cold.

Oh, shit. The chickens.

His boots squeaking against the icy crust, Artie Hayes follows the gruesome trail to a mangled hen. Its neck is snapped, legs are askew, and enough skin has been ripped away to leave the thigh muscles exposed.

He turns and blocks his wife Carmen's view of the carcass. "It's the fox again, Carm. I'll handle it."

"More chickens? How many?" Carmen pushes past him and peers at the dead bird. The predator's footprints are bigger than those of their hefty Maine Coon cat, Buster, but smaller than a good sized dog's. "Jeezum, Artie. I told you to fix that loose siding." She stomps off along the side of the barn and wades through drifts. She's following the tracks and the smears of blood and feathers.

Artie trudges through the snow drifts, down the narrow path he keeps shoveled to the barn. Buster races past him and skids to a stop, wriggling to be let inside. Artie takes a deep breath and jerks open the door, then heads straight through to the coop in the back. Ernie the pig,

oblivious to the drama and eager for his breakfast, grunts as Artie rushes by. The goats crowd their pen gate and bleat. Artie unlatches the coop and steps inside, Buster at his heels.

Chicken carnage. The smells, gag material. Dust, blood, feathers, and ammonia from the manure. Chicken guts and smashed eggs everywhere. Plus bodies.

Artie breathes through his mouth as little as possible. Good thing it's before breakfast. Wouldn't want to upchuck.

They're not all dead. Birds bunch together in one corner. Unharmed but trembling, their eyes bulge. More hens cram the perch at the far end of the coop.

Buster sniffs the sprawled remains and inspects each pile. He takes a tentative lick, then purrs. Artie nudges one of carcasses with his boot.

Stiff, been dead awhile.

He shoes Buster out of the coop and grabs an empty garbage bag. Back inside, he snatches up one body after another and stuffs them in the sack. His stomach roils.

Seven altogether, eight counting the one outside. A quarter of their flock.

Goddamn.

He knots the bag at the top and drops it in the trash can. Through the window he catches a glimpse of Carmen tramping towards the house. Her stiff back and jerky movements say plenty. He feeds Ernie and the goats, then calls for Buster. The two head to the house for breakfast.

Artie detours to start his truck, then Carm's rusty old Subaru. He can never be sure that either of the engines will catch in the deep chill of The County, northern Maine's remote upper third. But this morning, they do. Both he and Carm will have warm rides into work. He unplugs the cords to the headbolt heaters. He wrestles to coil the orange cables, rigid from the bitter chill.

The radio said it might storm tomorrow. This damnable deep freeze will have to warm up if it's going to snow. Too damn cold now.

Carmen ladles oatmeal into bowls as he comes in the kitchen door. The wood-fired cook stove practically glows. Artie kicks off his boots and stands close. His numb fingers thaw a bit while he turns his hands and inspects for cracks.

"What's the matter with us, Artie?" Carmen spoons maple sugar onto her oatmeal, pours milk. She passes a plate of cold blueberry muffins, left over from yesterday. "Here we are, only half-way through our forties. We've got years ahead. The kids are gone, off seeing the world, and we're still here, slaving to keep this place going." She pulls mugs out of the cupboard and fills each with coffee from the pot on the back of the stove. "We can't leave here even for an overnight. We haven't gone to Bangor in months, and that's just three hours away. Are we crazy or what?"

"Beats me." Artie slices his muffin and butters both sides before placing them cut side down on the griddle top of the cook stove. The pieces fry up crisp and caramel. He takes a crunchy bite out of one half, chews slowly. "Hey, I heard a great joke the other day when I was at the feed store. Want to hear it?"

"I don't feel funny."

“It’s not a funny joke, actually. Here goes: What did the farmer say when he won the lottery?”

“I don’t know,” sighs Carmen.

“Come on,” says Artie. “Wild guess.”

“Call a realtor, maybe? Or, I’m outta here?”

“Nope. Good try though.” Artie adds milk to his coffee, pauses for dramatic effect. “He says, ‘Now I can quit my job and farm full time.’”

Carmen groans. “That’s too close to the truth.”

“Aw, Hon, we know why we do it, most days. We had it all planned out before we were married, remember?” He sighs, scrapes the bottom of his now empty bowl, spooning out the syrupy-sweet milk from the bottom. “Basically it’s been good. But some days are harder than others.”

“And more expensive.”

Artie stands slowly, favoring his stiff knees and back. “I’ll put a patch on the coop tonight, okay? You get the butchering equipment together, make space in the freezer. I’ll have Dad help me this weekend. We’ll do Ernie and half the chickens.”

She nods but doesn’t smile. “Tell your dad to stay for dinner.”

“Will do.” Artie wraps the second half of his muffin in a paper towel, takes his coat from behind the woodstove, and puts on his boots. “Gotta hit the road. I’m late to meet with Mr. E. You know what a stickler he is for punctuality.” He bends over Carmen, who’s still working on

her oatmeal and kisses her on the forehead, squeezes her shoulder. “It’ll be okay, Hon, Always is, ya know?”