

Dawn Hunting

Dawn. I love this time of day because it's all mine. No one else to interfere with my thoughts.

All the men woke within five minutes of one another. I heard alarm clocks going on all over upstairs. They'll come staggering out of their bunks into the kitchen where I had coffee, eggs, and toast ready for them. "Rickie boy's good little wife Susie"--that's how they knew me. Some already dressed in their hunting camos. I put my hair in a ponytail so no one noticed the eggplant-colored bruise on my neck. I stitched up the flap of skin over my eyebrow as best as I could while looking in the mirror. A pair of butterfly bandages covered the worst of it.

Phil and Steve sat down and started gorging like hogs, but Hank said his stomach was still queasy from all the rye whisky and beer "him and the boys" had guzzled last night. Erik said he wanted just black coffee, but something in Erik's intense eyes said he was assessing the situation. He was the only one who kept asking me where Rick was that he couldn't be here in time for the annual hunt--this male-bonding ritual their boss Hank encouraged among his team. These ivy leaguers with their fancy titles and salaries. Two years ago they went white-water rafting through the Cataract Canyons in Utah, a class IV river. Phil would have drowned if he hadn't made it to an eddy, whereas Rick, the most cautious of the bunch, if you can call any forex trader "cautious," broke his collarbone when he was tossed into some rocks. I used to tell Rick that machismo will get them all killed one day.

That was before he betrayed me with her again, the little slut receptionist he told me the firm was getting rid of. I found out last week they promoted her instead and she was Rick's "wife" who went on that three-day trip to Vegas two weeks ago. I told Rick there would be serious repercussions if he betrayed me twice. I forgive once, I said. Never twice.

Erik wasn't Rick's friend as much as he thought. I know he was after Rick's position as youngest senior trader in the company, and that anything connected to Rick's comings and goings was important to him, so my husband's absence on this year's the boys' gun club hunting expedition was ringing alarms. They say women have the intuition, but men like Erik see things behind their eyes. Colorblind men can't tell red from green but they can tell the difference between a dozen shades of beige. They see what's out there in the bush that might be hunting them. My father always told me to cultivate my instincts, go with them because they are what keep you safe. "Civilization," he used to say, "that's a last-minute notion rattling around in a Neanderthal brain." We hunted wild hog together. "Trust what you *know*," he said; "never fret the consequences."

My instinct was telling me that Erik was the one trying to call Rick's cell last night after I went to bed. There's no service up here, and I had taken it out of Rick's pants and removed the battery.

I hustled about making small talk--"women's gossip," as old Hank, their mentor and boss calls it--and telling the men I was heading to the country store for the weekend's "victuals" after they headed out for the morning hunt. Hank laughed at me for using that "hillbilly" word.

I watched them go out the door in pairs in the same order every year since Rick opened the cabin to his clique from the firm; it was my father's bequest to me. Steve would stick close to Hank. Rick said his tongue must be as tough as shoe leather from ass-kissing the boss. Erik and Phil, the shrewdest of the junior traders, went northeast down toward the gorge. I watched their hunter's orange vests and caps disappear into the foliage.

Normally, it would be Rick and Erik hunting together--except that Rick wasn't just "delayed in the city," as I had told Hank and the rest when they pulled up in Hank's Range Rover. He was lying under the porch where I had dragged all two-hundred-fifteen pounds of him. When I confronted him the night before, an hour before the rest were scheduled to arrive, he denied his affair. I showed him the private investigator's report and the photos of his Las Vegas escapade with his secretary. He didn't deny it; he didn't break down and beg my forgiveness, which is what I expected. He calmly set the report on a table and then he backhanded me into the wall.

When I picked myself up, he punched me in the eye.

"That hurt? Tough shit, bitch," he said. "That prenup I made you sign means you get squat. You can pick your ass off the floor and get out of here before I really work you over. I've been bored with you for so long now--"

I was doubled over, staggering, but I made it to the chair where my purse was.

Rick wasn't through gloating. "I'll tell you what went on in that Vegas hotel room--"

The slug from my Smith & Wesson took him under his right eye. I was upset and missed the spot between his eyes just above the bridge of the nose, which was where I intended to put the bullet. Rick thought it funny my tiffany-blue moccasins and Glock matched. "Whoever heard of accessorizing a handgun?"

I'm a better shot with a hunter's slingshot. But I almost never miss with a crossbow. I dressed in full camos with a face mask. I went out in the direction Erik and Phil had taken. Twenty minutes later, I was stalking them from a ridge. I had a good angle with the sun was behind me. The first arrow from my Raptor went high; it tore a fat chunk out of Erik's neck. I could see the red geyser of blood spouting before he fell. I heard a boar grunt in the near distance, but I knew it was Phil and his favorite pig-stick calling the hogs. I headed toward the sound moving fast and low but without so much as a twig snapping as my father taught me years ago.

Phil came lumbering through the brush, a clumsy macho man oblivious to the wilderness listening to every step. He was easy. I sent a twenty-inch arrow with a wide cutting diameter through his heart from thirty yards. I was close enough to see the look of surprise on his face when he dropped. I waited for him to stop thrashing around; then I headed at a fast trot south-by-southeast.

Steve saw me approach and must have thought I was Rick in camouflage. He's grabbed my tits when he's drunk, but I never told Rick. I brought the crossbow up fast and took him through his right eyeball. One-hundred-fifty pounds of draw weight and 300 fps bolt speed snapped his head backwards; he collapsed straight to the earth. No movement on the ground.

Poor Hank. He was such a gentleman. But he was no hunter. I watched him bending over Steve's body from my cover behind some hickory trees. He let out a long banshee wail. His thirty-aught-six rifle was still slung over his shoulder. He never heard me coming up on him. I sent my fourth arrow deep into the back of his head. I didn't want him to suffer. I use the same carbon arrows for bear and buck so Henry's head had as much resistance as a melon to its deep penetration.

Only a blue jay as murder witness.

I remembered what I'd said last night:

"I'm fine, Hank. Really."

"You don't look so good, hon. Your eye's all bloodshot and that looks pretty sore. You say you fell coming down the stairs?"

If you only knew, I thought.

Steve said: "OK, Dawn, if your old man's not here by morning, we're leaving without him."

"I'm sure he'll be here soon," I said. "You know, Rick," I said; "always late."

I smiled: I was thinking of the look on Rick's face when he saw me turn around with the gun in my hand.

"That's Rickie, all right, always with his nose to the grindstone," said Phil with that big smirk.

Phil didn't think I'd catch the wink he threw to the guys. *Yeah, his nose is probably buried in his little twist's crotch right now* is what they were all thinking. They came here to share good times, enjoy their snobby get-together in my father's cabin, drink themselves blind with my cheating husband, tell lies, and brag about the next arbitrage or laugh at all the "stupid, ninety-nine percenters who don't own shit," as I'd heard Rick say so often. They'd drink all night and watch me slave for them in the morning while they laughed at me behind my back. I know they despised me for not being one of them, their country-club crowd, never good enough to meet their wives or girlfriends.

So who's laughing now, boys?

I barely had Rick stuffed into the crawl space as the four arrived. Weight lifting gave me the strength I knew I would need for that moment when and if it ever came. No last words, either. Something else my father taught me: *don't stand there gloating over your kill like a fool or you won't see what's coming up behind you*. I have an eight-inch boar gash on my calf to prove how right he was. Rick's one big mistake was that he did a lot of gloating and bragging. I won't have that. My father didn't teach me pride; he gave it to me with his blood.

Rick was right when he told me after our wedding I was out of my depth in Manhattan. But my father was right in the long run when he taught me to go with my instincts and to hell with the consequences. I'm free until Monday, when the phones will be ringing off the hook for the five no-shows at work. It might take a full day for the cops to figure it out, and I suppose the US Marshals will be sicced on me soon after, but I'll have cleaned out our savings and checking accounts before the dew dries in the morning. Rick thinks I've been visiting my father in Iowa for the last couple of years while he's enjoying his male camaraderie with Hank and the boys. But my father died sixteen months ago and left me his house in a suburb of Fairbanks. I've been creating a new life in Alaska with a brand-new identity, and I'm already known to the people in that neighborhood as the widow from the lower forty-eight of a soldier who died in Afghanistan.

I think my father always knew something about me that frightened him. He had killed men in the war. Blood and violence weren't things he ever shied from. It drove my mother away, but it made me understand I was just like him. Being a girl doesn't have many advantages, but there's one even Hollywood is slow to get around to: a very few of us remain unchanged all our lives; we're scorned by society because we lack the nurturing maternal instinct altogether. We're true sociopaths, amoral, undomesticated. I like to think of us as lionesses who like the hunt, like the way blood tastes from a kill. It's not a good idea to marry one of us. It's a much worse idea to try to hurt us. Ask Rick.

To see Robb T. White's website:

<http://tomhaftmann.wixsite.com/robbtwhite>