

November Hunt

by Jess Lourey

Chapter 1

Tom stamped his feet on the hard-packed snow. "It's cold enough to glaciare a damn shadow."

His partner nodded. "It's so cold, it'd freeze the balls off a pool table."

Tom chuckled. It came out in white cumulous puffs. "It's so cold I think the rock rattling around in my boot is my big toe."

"Amen to that." Clive knew it was his turn, but damn if it wasn't 20 below in the sunshine. It wasn't funny any more. "Pass the coffee?"

"Sure, if you can remind me why we agreed it'd be a good idea to muzzleloader hunt the last week in November." He tossed the silver thermos. It caught a dazzling ray of clean winter sunlight before landing neatly in Clive's gloved palm.

He didn't consider removing the gloves to twist off the cap. The zip of a vacuum opening was followed by the rich aroma of dark roast. "It's the only time it's allowed."

"Not what I meant." Tom dropped his weight onto the hay bale with a labored huff and began to pack his rifle. It was tricky work in this frigid temperature. If he hadn't just popped off his last round at a white-tailed buck well out of his Thompson Omega Z5's range, he'd be as happy as a clam in butter sauce.

"I don't know if you heard the news," he continued, "but it turns out we can buy meat at a grocery store. We don't need to freeze our hair off in a hay-bale fort drenched with deer whiz." Drawing in a breath for courage, he stripped his hands down to thin polar gloves and dropped a hundred grains of powder into the barrel from a pouch at his side. Next came the .50 caliber round. He grunted when he packed both with his ramrod. His hands felt like two wooden planks with chopsticks where the fingers should be. "Toss me the primer. And I wouldn't yell at you for moving the sun heater closer."

Clive obliged on both counts. "We shouldn't have brought it at all, you know. Animals catch wind of it, we might as well be on a beach in Mexico for all the deer we'll see."

Tom rubbed his hands together briskly in front of the glowing orange circle before yanking the breech on his rifle. He shoved in the primer with cold-clumsy hands, tapped the breech closed, and thrust his hands back into fur-lined gloves with a sigh. He jabbed his mitts toward the heater and rubbed them together until sensation returned in the form of intense tingling pain. "I mentioned we can buy meat at the grocery store?"

"You did." Clive kept his eyes nailed to the lunar-white landscape. "But a ten-point rack looks a helluva lot better than a t-bone mounted over your fireplace."

Tom grinned, and it cracked the icicles on his mustache. "That *was* a ten-pointer, wasn't it?"

“Yup, and if you had let it get close instead of shooting wild, we’d be on our way home right now. Might be days before we get another chance like that.”

Tom moved in next to him, still smiling. “I dunno. That might have been the only deer dumb enough to stick around for the winter.” Despite his complaints, there was no place in the world he’d rather be the last week of November, and he knew Clive felt the same. They’d been hunting buddies for over forty years—turkey, duck, deer, even elk the year one them was lucky enough to get a license—and the colder, the better. It was especially peaceful during muzzleloader season, when all of the hobby hunters returned to the city, packing up expensive gear that was smarter than they were and leaving only the locals, those with enough pioneer blood still bubbling in their veins that they’d roll out of bed before the sun had seriously considered rising, pull on six layers of clothing, and trudge to their pick-ups, which would start as often as not.

Clive nodded. “Looks that way. You check the salt lick before we set up shop? Maybe the deer finished it off and that’s why we’ve only seen the one.”

“I checked it two weeks ago when we came out bowhunting.”

“But not since?”

“Not since,” Tom said, taking the hint. He stretched his arms skyward until his back made a satisfying pop. “Anyone ever tell you that you’re lazier than furniture? You’re lucky I have to water the trees anyhow. Watch for that big buck while I’m out there.”

“I’ll be doing nothing but.”

Tom left the relative shelter of their hunting blind, a cube of hay four bales high and four across to keep them out of sight and scent of the animals. He crunched over the surface of the snow. Fourteen inches of the white stuff buried the ground, but at this temperature, it turned hard as rock, squeaking underfoot. The air was dry, and the sun refracted off of a billion ice crystals on the ground and the trees. It was blinding. He couldn’t be happier.

Clive watched his old friend footslog across the landscape. This was dedicated hunting land, over 400 acres of woods, water, hills, and prairie just across the Otter Tail County line. A mutual friend owned it, and though he charged the city folks to use it, his comrades hunted on it for free. The blinds and hunting stands were already in place, but this late in the year, they were responsible for checking the salt licks and, if they could get away with it, corn piles.

Tom had been right about Clive’s general laziness, and his mentioning it hadn’t bothered Clive one bit. All this time hunting together had fine-tuned their relationship into a comfortable marriage of shared interests, a tolerance for quiet spells, and a mutual admiration for one another’s skills. A cracking sound toward Clive’s left pulled him out of his reminiscence. Something rustled in the copse of trees 200 yards up. Tom must have heard it too because across the snow tundra he froze, staring in the direction of the same grove.

No birds sang. No wind blew. There were only two men on the frost-scorned landscape of a Minnesota November, the clean blue scent of cold cracking their nostrils. The silence lasted until the magnificent buck stepped out of the brambled woods and into the open. He sniffed the air and barked, low in his throat, a warning sound. His rack reached toward the sun, all fourteen points glistening like polished wood. The proud beast glanced across the unbroken prairie toward Tom, who stood as motionless as stone. He was 100 yards from the massive beast and an equal distance from his gun.

Clive already had his rifle at the ready, perched over the top of the blind. His breath tore out short and shallow. In one slow but fluid movement, he brought his hand to the trigger. He squinted and focused down the sight. His target was in range, a clean shot. He couldn’t feel the

press of the metal lever through his thickly-gloved finger, but he knew he was pulling it toward him, every tiny movement tumbling the powder closer to the spark. His heart was racing, pounding, forcing hot blood to his hands and feet. The bass snap of his trigger, when it finally came, was drowned in the momentary explosion of black and red flame out the end of his rifle. The pungent tang of fired gunpowder filled his nostrils.

Tom fell to the ground instantly, his blood a violent raspberry red staining the snow. One hundred yards away, the buck sprinted back into the woods, unharmed.

Chapter 2

The thermostat on my car was out, or so I figured as I used the tender meat of my hand to scrape a peephole on the inside of my windshield. Thirty years in Minnesota teaches you these handy bits: mosquitoes are attracted to white clothing and pretty much anything else you'd like to wear, a three-party government with a former professional wrestler at the helm isn't the laugh riot you'd think it'd be, and if your car runs great except for the heater, it's probably your thermostat.

It was the "probably" in that last piece of wisdom that hung me up. As long as I pretended my car was just a four-door snowmobile with a radio, I could remain in the dark. Once I brought it to a mechanic, though, I risked hearing that my flux capacitor, or some other ridiculously expensive and hard-to-reach part, was shot. And then I'd need to choose one of three options: retire my beloved teenaged Toyota Corolla and take out a loan to buy another car, dip into my meager savings to repair her, or pretend that I misunderstood the mechanic and return to blissful ignorance? *I'm sure your car is at peace with Schmidt, too, Mechanic. Thanks and have a nice day!*

Just thinking about it made my shoulders tighten. At least my Toyota blocked the wind. That would suffice for now, record-cold November be damned. I wiggled my toes inside their good-to-72-below Sorels and rescraped the windshield spy-hole. Being no dummy, I was driving slowly to compensate for my lack of vision. I didn't need to drive far, a three-mile hop skip from my place to visit a friend I hadn't seen since October. He'd called last week with surprise good news, and today was the first day that worked out for both of us to celebrate.

We'd met this past summer, right around when I was acquiring my Battle Lake sea legs. This west central Minnesota town had a downside, no question—not a single ethnic restaurant, no movie theater within 20 miles, and at least one mysteriously dead body floated to the surface every month, give or take—but you couldn't beat the people. Every last one of 'em would charge into a burning house to pull out a stranger. Of course, immediately afterward, they'd head to the Turtle Stew to whisper about how it was almost certainly poor housekeeping that had caused the fire in the first place. It was the timeless small town dance of solidarity versus privacy.

I'd found myself cutting in last spring when my friend Sunny coerced me into leaving Minneapolis to housesit her doublewide resting on the most beautiful 200 acres this side of the Mississippi. I'd agreed, leaving behind six graduate credits in English, a waitressing job, and a

boyfriend who tackled lovemaking with as much patience and skill as a monkey trying to figure out how to change the TV channel (*one...of...these...must...be...it...*). Made Battle Lake look pretty good.

The town had treated me well in many ways. For example, for the first time in my life, I had enough friends to form a basketball team, were I so inclined. No one treated me like a pariah for my father's crimes, as they had in Paynesville, the tiny town I'd grown up in. And shortly after arriving, I'd landed a full-time job running the library after a homicide opened up the director position, proving that murder has perks if you're not the dead body. I also wrote a recipe column for the local paper as well as freelance articles, and three weeks ago I'd bowed to the Fates and begun pursuing my private investigator's license. Mrs. Berns had planted the idea in my head. "This many dead bodies in your vicinity, you either got to be a mortician, a cop, or a PI, or people start to talk," is how I believe she'd put it. We both agreed that the first option was gross and the second unlikely, which left only the third. That required undergoing certification training and tracking down a lawyer or licensed investigator who'd let me work under them for 6000 hours. It was a daunting number, to be sure, but I'd gotten nibbles.

Oh, and did I mention I was in a relationship with kind, smart, sexy Johnny Leeson? I'd been spanked by the cosmos enough to recognize it's bad luck to brag, but here's the truth: Johnny is so hot that women cross their legs to keep from involuntarily whistling when he walks by. I know you're wondering how I scored a hottie with a body like him, and to be honest, I'm as baffled as the next person. All I can tell you is that it happened, and I'm glad every day for it.

That's not to say I'd become magically stable. In fact, certain it was only a matter of time before I messed it up, I'd put clear parameters on our fledgling relationship: we'd keep separate lives, no "L" word until I gave permission, and no going beyond third base for the first six months. This was a seismic shift for me. I had a history of starting relationships with a trip to the bedroom, and it had never worked out particularly well for me. I wanted something better this time, and every afterschool special I'd ever watched had convinced me I'd have to keep my legs together to get it.

The point I'm trying to make is that I was in a good place in my life and as nervous as a funeral giggle because of it. This fine world would come crashing down around my ears soon. That's just how the dice had always rolled for me. Until disaster struck, though, I was determined to make the best of it, starting with this afternoon's celebration with Jed.

As long as me and my fridge on wheels could survive all the way to his place, that was. Man it was cold out. That's one more thing you learn from thirty years in Minnesota, by the way. Once the temperature drops to the double digits below zero there's no point in applying adjectives. Cold is cold. I tugged my Swedish ski cap lower to protect the numb tips of my ears and breathed into my gloved hand to warm my nose. The warm air leaking through my mittens made my fingers ache in contrast.

In our conversation last week Jed hadn't mentioned what we would be celebrating, and that was likely because it hadn't occurred to him that I might want to know. I smiled, sending white puffs of frozen breath through my teeth. Sometimes Jed acted like he hadn't paid his brain bill, but that was his charm. He was one of the last innocents, a Shaggy minus Scooby Doo. His parents owned the popular Last Resort, and he still lived with them, serving as their man Friday as well as the oddjobber fix-it guy for many Battle Lake residents.

I slapped my hands on my thighs to circulate the blood and visualized a steaming cup of cocoa. Jed's mom had concocted the most amazing hot chocolate when we'd last gotten together in October, laced with a hint of mint and topped with homemade whipped cream. I salivated at

the memory, then remembered that Jed's parents always flew to Florida for the winter, leaving just before Thanksgiving. That meant they'd hit the skies around the same time Jed had called me.

Maybe I could talk him into going to the Shoreline for veggie chili and fresh cornbread, I thought, as I hung a left on Lakeshore Drive. I caught sight of the Last Resort sign a half a mile ahead. The deep snow buried the bottom quarter of the sign, so anyone not from around here wouldn't know to "Turn Right to Claim Your Slice of Summer Heaven!" Maybe it was intentional, with that line serving as a paint-based barometer.

In the winter, this touristed side of the lake became a sparsely populated stretch. I caught only glimpses of the landscape through my tiny sighthole, and the lack of peripheral vision was beginning to make me claustrophobic. Maybe Jed could help me rig up an electric space heater in the car. Spurred by that hope, I flipped my turn signal and eased up on the gas in case the driveway was icy.

Too late, I realized that there was no driveway. I plowed into a monster drift of thick white snow broken by the occasional gray-limbed shrub. My foot attacked the brakes, but not before my front tires buried themselves in a snowbank. I swore like a one-legged sailor, my hot words freezing the second they left my mouth and dropping to the ground like ice cubes. Probably they'd roll under my seat and be forgotten until they thawed next spring, popping like soggy, four-letter firecrackers.

I gunned the car forward and back, forward and back, but it was no use. My vehicle was as stuck as a pig in the slaughter trough. I flicked off the ignition and shouldered my way out. The frigid air assaulted my cheeks like shooting needles. I yanked my scarf over my nose and breathed shallowly to avoid the crackling pain of mucus membranes freezing from the outside in.

Except for my ragged breaths, it was utterly silent outside my vehicle. Glancing around, two other facts struck me: the Resort's driveway hadn't been plowed since last week's heavy snowfall—hence my stuckness—and the mailbox was so past full that the carrier had left a bag of letters tied to its front. I could have been on Mars for how alone I suddenly felt. I ignored the warning thud of my heart and took stock of the situation. It was too cold to stay near an unheated car, and I didn't own a cell phone.

Shielding my eyes against the setting sun, I stared the 200 yards to the main house and eleven cabins that comprised the Last Resort. Not a single light shone in any of the buildings, and I couldn't make out footprints or shoveled paths. I replayed last week's conversation with Jed. Had he sounded down? Mentioned leaving town?

I tightened my wool scarf and slogged to the mailbox, which was placed conveniently on the shoulder of Lakeshore Drive. It was too cold to take off my mittens, so I used my hands like crude tongs to paw through the letters. The oldest was an electric bill, postmarked the day after I'd talked with Jed. A glance in the bag showed me that the carrier had dropped the most recent mail off today. But nobody was picking it up. A chill icier and more personal than the winter wind licked my spine.

What had happened to my friend?