

On The Hunt, On the Lamb

Word Count: 4,518

Walter and Bridget were having a good time on an ugly couch with Great Aunt Judy. The brown floral pattern swept and climbed over the dated sofa. The seats should have sagged under the weight of the years, but no one visited Great Aunt Judy, and she never sat on her prize couch. Great Aunt Judy favored the brown corduroy recliner by the window. Walter and Great Aunt Judy had coffee, and Bridget had some quick fix Swiss Miss cocoa with marshmallows. It was an excellent start for a hunting trip, thought Bridget. Great Aunt Judy had every confidence in the pending success of the deer hunt. Bridget's mom had been uneasy about letting Walter take their daughter to northwest Colorado on a hunting trip. Amy protested that Bridget was a girl and too young. Bridget bristled at the objection.

"I'm not too young," Bridget protested. "I am 12, and Dad was 9 on his first hunting trip."

"Well, he's a boy," Amy said.

As soon as she said it, she regretted it. Here Amy had been teaching Bridget the importance of being a feminist. She'd started with the HBO Original Gloria Steinem: In Her Own Words, and she'd subscribed them to B*tch Media. But when it came down to guns and hunting, she was a hypocrite. So, Amy bit her tongue and waved goodbye to Walter and Bridget as they backed out of the driveway in his red F150. By the time Walter and Bridget made it to Great Aunt Judy's, on the way to Colorado from St. Louis, Bridget had forgotten all about the argument with her mother. She was just too excited about the father-daughter time. Their first stop had been for dinner at a Denny's just outside of Kansas. Dad let her order off the adult menu. Bridget forced herself to eat every bite because she didn't want Dad to feel like he wasted his money. When they

got to Great Aunt Judy's small clapboard house in a wasteland of dirt, Bridget began to feel like she was on a grand adventure. Inside the small living room, looking over a stack of photo albums piled high on the floor. Bridget studied the black and white faces of all the Englund's that had come before. She felt like a solid link in a never-ending chain of people, connected as one. Each face like a fingerprint with whorls and arches, the captured smiles and frowns, from squinting into the Sun, from a life of hard work, burned into immortality on film.

"This album is mostly your Dad and Uncle," Great Aunt Judy said.

Bridget wiped the cocoa from her upper lip with her shirt sleeve and made an eager dive into the snapshots of her Dad at her age. By this album, color photos peered back at Bridget's intense gaze. She looked intently at the boy who would become her father. She looked just like him, apart from the braids. The photos' entertainment wore thin with the sinking Sun, and both Bridget and Walter were itching to get back on the road. As they said their goodbyes, Great Aunt Judy removed a porcelain angel she had painted from a shelf behind the recliner and placed it in the palm of Bridget's hand.

"To bless you on your journey," Great Aunt Judy said.

It was ivory with gold trim and faceless, which made it a little creepy, but it was, at the same time, pretty. Bridget sensed her Dad stiffen with Aunt Judy's religious outreach, with the advent of the angel, so Bridget stuffed it into her right pocket.

Departing at this hour, they would have to get a motel room because it would be too dark to set-up camp. Bridget was okay with another diversion; it meant Dad would let her raid the vending machine. Bridget ate enough junk food to put her in a food coma. However, she did have an entire bag of Cheetos leftover, which she stuffed into the inside pocket of her deer hunting coat

draped across a rattan chair. The Motel room was gross. It was last updated and cleaned in the 70s. Walter told Bridget to sleep on top of the covers.

They rose with the Sun and drove into Basalt and Roaring Fork Valley. Bridget was anxious to use her new gun. Dad had bought her rifle at Cabela's. It was a Savage Arms Axis XP Bolt-Action Rifle in TrueTimber Strata Camo. It was a mouthful, and it was all hers. Riding in the front seat of Dad's F-150, Bridget slid her hunter's license from her Hello Kitty wallet. She had a license to hunt before a license to drive. She was thrilled.

Walter parked the car in the lot. They were going to hike the rest of the way into camp. Bridget carried a lighter load than her Dad, but after 3 miles, she was missing her Nintendo Switch and the living room couch. Walter sensed Bridget's waning enthusiasm and began telling her glory stories of the hunt. Underneath each word, he wondered if Amy was right about Bridget's age and gender. Once camp was made, Walter tutored Bridget to make a fire and pitch a tent; then, he got to the exciting part. How to shoot her rifle. Bridget was a natural. Her aim was good, but she complained about the kick-back of the gun. Her shoulder was sore, and Bridget figured she'd have to get a good shot off quick tomorrow because she could sense her lack of stamina. The rest of the afternoon, Bridget gathered sticks that could be burned in the fire; then, she sat on a log and ate Cheetos while nursing her tender shoulder. The noises of the animals kept Bridget awake that night. She tried to catalog each sound, but the sounds were new. The only animal she'd had any close proximity to was her tuxedo cat, KC. Bridget snuggled up to her sleeping Dad's back. Close to sunrise, Bridget nodded off, just to be awakened by her Dad. It was time.

They had hiked another couple of miles into the woods. She walked behind her Dad with her loaded rifle slung over her good shoulder. The weight was pleasing, even if the Camo was unappealing. Walter came to a stop, Bridget strode up beside him.

"Do you hear something?" she said.

"Shh. Whisper."

"Did you hear something?" she whispered.

"I thought so. Let's stop here for a moment and check this clearing."

They lay on their stomachs at the edge of the brush and waited. Bridget's heart was pounding, but the waiting eventually took the edge off. She tried to shift her position. But her Dad steadied her movements with a hand on the shoulder.

"There's a deer at the other side of the clearing moving this way," he said.

Bridget looked, but she didn't see anything until it moved further out of the brush. It was a 10 point buck. It was beautiful.

"Okay, get ready. Just like I taught you," Dad said.

Suddenly, the gun felt bulky and heavy. Bridget squeezed her eyes shut and prayed for a good shot. She was pumped with adrenaline and did not heed Walter's next round of directions. She let off a shot, and the deer dropped after the smallest hesitation.

Bridget couldn't believe it. She did it. She shot a deer. Walter was also dumbfounded. Carefully, although Bridget was primed to move with haste, Walter and Bridget closed the distance between them and the deer. Absorbed in the glassy-eyed deer, Bridget failed to hear the dry,

crunching steps of another. When she clued into the sound, she expected to see another deer, but it was a large man with a scraggly dark blond beard. His blue eyes were penetrating and darted between her Dad, the deer, and herself. His mouth was anchored tight in a grimace. The clearing rocked a deathlike quite that staggered in with the mysterious man

"Hello," Walter said and extended his hand.

"You g-g-got me b-buck," the man said, snubbing the handshake.

"Um, it is her buck," Walter said.

Walter rose to a standing position with his weight balanced across both feet, shoulder's width apart, but his stance was reduced in the bulking frame of the stranger. Bridget stood behind her Dad with her rifle. The intruder eyed Bridget. Bridget made a mental sketch of the man from his stutter to his stubbly chin and his droopy left eyelid. He looked rough, like he'd been living in the woods a long time.

"Yeah, her b-buck," he said and turned away.

They watched him leave to the right side of the clearing.

"What was that about?" Bridget asked.

"I think that's what we call a sore loser," Walter whispered. "Keep your voice down. It will carry across the clearing."

Walter taught Bridget how to field dress a deer through whispered directions and grunts with the gutting knife. She moved back a few steps as her Dad positioned the deer belly-up and pointed the hind-end toward the downward slope in the clearing.

"You want to let gravity help drain the blood," he said without looking at his daughter.

If he had glanced in her direction during the gutting and removal of the organs, he would have found a piqued child. Bridget had understood they were going to kill a deer, but she had no prior experience that could prepare her for hacking up a large animal. Her adrenaline was ramping up again. She was nauseated and wanted to run back to the brush, the camp, the car, and home. But she was stuck in the dry grass kneeling in a patch now wet with blood. The world seemed sluggish as she watched her Dad remove a foldable saw from his backpack.

"Now, I'm going to use the Wyoming saw to split the sternum. Then I'm going to release the diaphragm and cut the windpipe," he said.

She was silent, kneeling with her butt resting on her heels and the blood-soaked knees of her jeans feeling cold and itchy. Her father's words, instructions sank into the bloody earth. They were lost on her. Bridget felt like her head was a balloon floating away over the field. While her Dad continued to pull out the deer's innards and place them in a pile to the side of the deer, she fought back the tears. She didn't want him to see that this father-daughter excursion was a mistake.

Walter continued to give dressing instructions and point out the meat they would keep. He told her about the excellent venison meatloaf recipe he'd gotten from Great Aunt Judy, which will go great with what was left of his homemade Meade. He'd even let her have a little sip; after all, this was her kill. Walter was beaming with pride. He handed the bloody knife to Bridget and instructed her on making a cut; he finally noticed her distress.

Walter gave Bridget a brisk hug and smeared blood across the shoulder of her coat. They packed-in the meat to hike out. Despite it being wasteful, Walter decided not to make multiple

trips to carry all the meat out. One look at Bridget's face, and he knew she couldn't take much more of this hunting trip. Perhaps Amy had been right.

As they made their way back to camp, Walter sensed they were being followed. They paused on the trail, and he looked behind them.

"Wait here," Walter said.

"Where are you going?" Bridget asked.

Walter did not answer; he just handed her his gun. He walked several feet and climbed an elephant-sized boulder. He did not reach the top. The rock was smooth and had no footholds or handholds. He came crashing down and busted his ankle. There was a bulge of a broken bone underneath the skin.

"Dad!" Bridget exclaimed.

After calling out to him, she had fainted at the sight of his blood. When she came to, her Dad was lying unconscious, and at the time, she thought he was dead. She roused him by shaking his shoulders and pounding on his chest amidst her angry tears. When he regained consciousness, he told her he was going into shock, and she had to go get help. But help was a half day's hike away. Walter was in too much pain to shush her crying.

"Shit. God Damn it," Walter said, none too quiet.

"Dad, can't you just walk a little?" Bridget asked.

She knelt beside him. After her Dad took a breather, he asked her to help him up. But he slumped back to the ground with a new round of curse words.

"Bridget, I can't put weight on this ankle. It's broken. You're going to have to go get help," he said. His blood-stained hands gripped her by the shoulders. There was more blood in this day than a Steven King made for TV movie, thought Bridget.

"What? No," she said. "I can't do that."

"Bridget, I need you to do this for me. I can't walk. You have to be a big girl and do this," Walter said.

He instructed her to follow the trail and keep checking for a signal on his phone. He uncertainly reminded her to steer clear of the hunter. He didn't want to scare her even more, but he felt she needed to know.

"Now go on, you can do this," he said.

His voice was a little firmer than he had intended, but he needed to push her. He knew this entire day was outside her comfort zone, but there was nothing he could do about it now. Bridget kissed her dad goodbye, slung her rifle over her shoulder, and mustered up the courage to walk away.

Bridget had not hiked too far before she sat in the dirt, leaning back against a blue spruce just a few paces off the trail. She sat in a spill of pine needles, and she picked them up and rolled them between her fingers. Bridget felt like she could not go on. She had come to a stop. Her self-pity was a thin shelter like the tree. Her sight of the path was blurred by tears and sunlight. Bridget expected it was high noon. Her adventure had been snagged and unraveled by the interference of a crazy hunter. She didn't want that damn deer. The heavy stench of it was in her backpack.

Bridget took a deep breath and vomited across her sleeve and into the dirt. She knew she had to

make it to the ranger's station to get help. But she hadn't paid that much attention on their hike in. Bridget looked up into the towering blue spruce and started climbing the 90-foot tree.

Taking on one sturdy branch at a time, climbing higher and higher into the blue spruce, she got only 15 feet off the ground when she saw a man moving down the trail from whence she had come. It was him. It was the crazy hunter, and he was tracking her. Bridget wrapped herself around the tree. Her climbing was arrested by fear. The hunter stopped just 5 feet off from the blue spruce. Bridget was sure he could smell her fear or the deer meat strapped to her back. She fretted he would hear her heart pounding in her chest. She was afraid of dying, really dying like the deer. Her hot tears rolled down her cheeks in silence. Before this hunt, her tears had been accompanied by loud cries spilled in her mother's arms. This trip had taught her how to cry alone. Finally, the hunter moved off. He was backtracking. Bridget wondered if he had found her Dad or if he would, and she was afraid of what he would do to her injured father.

Bridget's arms and legs were beginning to tingle. She needed to climb down. She couldn't see the hunter from her perch, and he'd been gone a long time. With her rifle strapped to her back, she began the long descent. The bark left scratches in her sweaty palms. Her grip was precarious; still, she did not know what she feared more falling or the crazed hunter. Bridget thought about doubling back to her Dad without help, but she knew she had to go on alone. Her Dad needed medical attention.

All of this had seemed daunting enough, and now the hunter was tracking her. Bridget was crumbling under the weight of the day. Hope seemed out of reach. Bridget waited in the branches of the spruce. She waited for strength or courage to come like in a book with a flip of the page the qualities of a hero would be bestowed upon her. She watched the trembling aspens dancing in

the wind. She knew it was going to get cold at night. She had to move. Bridget did her best to put her feelings aside. Then she realized it was her fear that propelled her forward despite the obstacles. She had to continue to outpace the hunter and the Sun. Yes, she was armed, but if killing a deer left her wrecked. She could never pull the trigger on a person. The gun was no good to her.

Bridget finally climbed all the way down from her perch with a good idea of the direction she needed to be going. She picked up her pace and stopped feeling sorry for herself. She must get to the ranger. It was with relief that Bridget stumbled into her and Dad's camp with the banked fire and the orange pup tent. But the tent was deflated, and broken stakes were strewn about. The ax was missing from the stack of wood. Water had been poured on the fire. Somehow, the hunter had beaten her here. Bridget spun in circles looking for the crazed man. She clutched her gun in her left hand. This tool of death for the deer was her only defense from a madman.

Bridget was unsure of her next move. She did not have the decision and confidence of her father. Bridget stood silent, closed her eyes, and listened. Off to the right, she heard water, rushing water. Bridget moved off toward Frying Pan river. She thought the sound of the water could camouflage her movements. She remembered how the river ran close to the parking lot, car, and ranger's station. Bridget breached a 30 foot drop off and carefully started a descent to the water's edge. The rock was brittle even under her small frame. She moved slowly, and she slid as much as she climbed down the cliff. Once on the rocky shore, Bridget drank handfuls of clear water. Her hands grew bone-cold in the running water, so she shoved them in her pockets. Bridget felt the little porcelain angel in her right pocket. She withdrew the angel from the sanctuary of her coat, and it glinted in the Sun. It was a beacon. Bridget whispered a prayer to the little angel, looking for guidance and protection. She named her Grace.

On the shoreline of the wild roaring river, Bridget realized she was standing in the open. She would be an easy target, so she found a spot masked in the limbs of another Colorado Blue Spruce. She squatted and pulled out her rifle to use the eyeglass to size up her environment. If all was peaceful, she would venture back out and follow the Frying Pan river down to the ranger's station. A crack sounded above in the rock face. Bridget heard him before she saw him. She looked up to see the hunter. Instinctively, she held her breath. He stood at the cliff edge, searching for her. He carried his rifle in hand like an extension of himself, and he began to climb down. She watched his worn brown leather hiking boots patched with duct tape and laced in hot pink laces through her site. He stepped too quickly and lost his footing on the loose shale. He fell from the top of the rock face, and he could do nothing to brace himself with the gun in his hand. His bulky body fell 30 feet to the bottom. He landed with a sickening crack. Bridget waited for him to get up. After several minutes, Bridget rose to her feet. She stuffed the angel Grace back into her pocket. Eventually, she crept forth from her hiding spot. Her gun was cocked and aimed.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

She was met with silence. Bridget slowly closed the gap with her rifle in hand. Then she saw it. A pool of dark blood spreading out onto the shoals, emanating from the back of the man's head. His dead eyes were open. Bridget stood guard and cried. She had just prayed for him to be gone, dead. But she didn't really mean it. She just wanted to be safe. Bridget was like a sentinel to death. A death she felt she managed. In her steadfast position, she let the moment hurt. Bridget was afraid to move from the dead man, to turn her back. Maybe he wasn't dead. Her day had been maimed and marred by death. She could see nothing valiant about hunting. She'd much rather go with her mother to buy meat at the grocery store. The day waxed on indifferent to her plight. The Sun was retreating in the sky. It was not going to heed her prayers. With a sinking

feeling, Bridget watched the Sun go down. Before the light faded completely, she unbagged the deer meat in her backpack, put it on the hunter's chest, and wrapped his hands around it. He had wanted that deer so badly, it had cost him his life.

Bridget had to move. She certainly did not want to be caught in the dark with this body. The cliff face, now truly ominous, was a no go for Bridget. She hiked down alongside the water. She was determined to get help for her father. But in the fragile light of the moon, Bridget tripped and fell. There was a snap and a poking into her ribs. It wasn't a penetration, but she had fallen on something sharp. She heard it when she sat up—the sharp slide of porcelain shards. Bridget pulled out the little angel. Grace had a broken wing. She was wounded, and Bridget felt guilty about the broken angel. The angel had protected her, even if at too high a price.

Bridget looked at Grace, and she thought of throwing her into the river, but the longer she looked at it, the more the faceless angel began to look like herself. Unformed, miniature brought to life out of love and death. Wasn't that who Bridget was? The faceless angel called out to Bridget. Go, Go. But go where? She was trapped like a little figurine, and any movement meant breakage. Bridget decided to make a small camp on the bank under the moonlight and next to the dark water. A place to shelter just long enough until she could see again to continue her trek.

There had been a gloss, a shine to life before this day. Life was filled with that new doll smell and promised fairytale adventure, glorious and unreal. The days before were not raw, like today. Today, life had ripped open, proving reality to be a gash, a gaping wound that even a parent could not brush away. Her father's dependence upon her to save his life was unfair. The boundaries of her existence had been blown to pieces when she shot that deer. The hunting had felt like a game, all the way on up to the dressing. The gore, the blood-smear in the tall grass,

on her father's hands, and on her own were someplace other than she had ever been before.

Bridget knew there was no going back. Then the hunter had appeared a surreal menace in the heat of the Sun. His demeanor, a demand in itself, reflected his desire. He was a force to be reckoned with, his envy an insurmountable lust and hate.

"It was a damn deer," Bridget said under her breath. She had mourned the deer and the crazed hunter long enough. She had to seek help for her Dad. Bridget didn't know how much time she had, but she knew she needed to hurry, and this dead man had taken up too much time already. In the moonlight, Bridget set off following the roaring river again. She kept Dad's cell phone handy to check for a signal, but there was none to be had in that valley. Bridget considered looking for a place to climb back up, but after the hunter's fall, she wasn't keen on climbing anymore.

The moonlight shone off the water in a fickle fashion. It winked when blocked by the shadows of the trembling aspens. Bridget wondered if a ranger would even be present in the night. She wondered what her Dad was doing. Her faith in herself was growing with every rocky step. She would succeed. She had to. The phone was dying at the bend in the river. Bridget wished she were at home. She wished she had survival skills. Her wishes got her nowhere, but her steady plodding and hopeful monologue whispered in the dark built an armor of bravery.

When Bridget approached the ranger station at a run, she had no idea the time. The phone was long dead. Her hope bled into disbelief that she had reached her destination. Bridget was fearful the station would fade away in front of her, but her commotion had roused the park ranger who met her at the door. Quickly, but not quick enough for Bridget, a team was assembled. Bridget was given a granola bar and water while waiting for the Sun to break over a new day.

On the climb back into the woods, the little angel clinked inside her pocket; when they came upon her father, he was rough, but he would be all right. As the men righted Walter and got him on a gurney to carry him out of the woods, they praised Bridget for being a hero. Bridget walked back out of the woods. She wanted to feel relieved or thankful, but these feelings were lost, just out of reach. Bridget felt tight and wound-up like a spool of twine, taunt like a high-wire under a circus act. She also felt new and hardened, and yet fragile and glazed like the porcelain angel. Bridget felt like she was carrying her former self in pieces, waiting for a private moment to glue herself back together. Her right hand wrapped around the broken angel in her pocket as she tucked into the ambulance with her father. Looking at his ghostly face, she decided to keep the hunter's fate a secret. Someone would find him. She was done. When Bridget and Walter finally returned home to Amy, Bridget superglued Grace's wing and put her on a shelf.