



‘The Hunt’

I've always found that little pockets of in-depth knowledge are far superior to the broader, shallower kind. Take people who read the newspapers. Always up on their high horses because they know who the president of Nigeria is; or where exactly East Timor is; or what disaster is happening somewhere. Well, good for them. I don't read the papers much, except for the weather and the horoscope sections, but I still know things. I'm a veterinary nurse and I know a lot of things. Don't go thinking I'm ignorant; I understand how the world works. I understand how to get what I want.

I knew when I saw Roger that I wanted him. Pretty much straight away. It wasn't exactly love at first sight; a bit more calculated than that. You see, I'd thought that vets were a catch at first, when I was young. Then I realized they aren't at all. They work such long hours and they don't earn as

much as you might think. And they always have some bodily fluid somewhere on them. I'm not exactly the queasy type but it gets old. It's usually blood, in fairness, but not just the regular type from out of a good, clean vein. No, it'll always be from a horse having a nosebleed or from some cow's uterus when a calf gets stuck. And it's always under their fingernails or matting their hair. Always. If you look hard enough. Vets just aren't what they're cracked up to be.

Then I thought: farmers. We see enough of them round these parts. But I'm wiser now. Older. And, I realized, sheep farmers are the same old story. Lambing season is a bloody nightmare – no thank you very much. And dairy farmers are out. Who wants to be up at five every morning making coffee, and you never get to go away on holiday. Beef farmers, I thought. That's the way to go. Also, I love steak. Goodbye two-minute noodles and microwave meals. Hello rump, sirloin, ribeye. Medium rare, of course, with a little mustard and a few crispy potatoes. Maybe some peas.

So I guess I had an idea about it, and then Roger walked into the practice, just to pick up a couple of bottles of antibiotics. John Deere cap on his head, strong forearms. They have a look, cattle farmers. And he's pretty handsome really. Tall and tanned. But not handsome enough to be used to female attention, to know how to pick up on it, much less deflect it. So that part wasn't difficult. I have long hair.

Those types always like long hair. And I'm thin, sort of fragile-looking. I'm actually quite strong but I'd never let on. Never lift a heavy bag. And I know exactly how to open a tight jar, you just need to pop the lid with a spoon, but I'd never actually do it unless I'm on my own. Why would I? Let men have those small victories if it makes them happy, and trust me, it does.

He's a good sort, Roger. Just a bit naive. Like a Labrador. Eager, and he'd never believe a bad word about anyone. He's married though. That's the thing. Helen is her name. Bit of a stiff, I believe. Catching Roger's attention was a piece of cake, and starting the affair was easy – even making it seem like it was all his idea. But getting him to break it off with Helen, that would be a bit more tricky. I wouldn't want to be too direct about it, you see. Men don't like pressure. You can say what you like about gender equality and women's rights, and I'm all for it, but men like to do the chasing. They need the hunt. They just do. It's the way of the world. If you don't know that, then reading all the newspapers you can find isn't going to help you.

We meet up often in the woods by his house, but that can't carry on forever, even if he does tell me he loves me more than anything, that I'm his precious forest fairy. Words are cheap. And who needs a lover anyway? They're not hard to come by. But I wouldn't want to bring it up. What kind of

forest fairy would start going on about commitment? Not a smart one, that's for sure. So I'd been thinking for a while, pretty much since we started out three months ago, about how to play this one out. And then it all came together.

Helen went away to see her mother so I visited the farm, under the pretence of checking puppies, of course. And that's when I saw Flora. All three hundred kilos of her. She's quite magnificent really, and she has that nice way about her, like so many pigs do. They're sharp, you know. They wouldn't bother with newspapers if they could read, because they see the world for what it is. She looked at me with her sidelong glance and the little rims of white around the edges of her eyes, and I thought: it's you, Flora. You are the answer.

You see, Helen is fond of taking Flora out to look for truffles in the woods, and Flora could lead her right to us, especially if I played my cards right. Because I know things. Deep little pockets of knowledge. I know that truffle pigs can smell the tiniest trace of truffles from long distances, even hundreds of metres away, even deep under the soil. They can smell better than dogs, and they're just as clever. I know that they don't just like truffles; they *lust* after them. They're passionate about them. Because truffles contain the same compound that's found in the saliva of boars. And the sweat of men, incidentally. That's why, if you think about it, you'll realize that the musky smell of truffles is actually

quite familiar. Kind of masculine. They smell like earth and wood and sex.

Even so, I wouldn't take any chances. Even if sweat and sex have the right smell, I'd push it just a little bit further. Just a dab of truffle oil – not enough for Roger to notice, but enough for Flora. Just a touch, maybe on his neck, like cologne. Close to the pulse, so that when I made his heart race all that scent would blossom like rain flowers in a storm. And Flora would lead Helen right to us, like a guide dog leading the blind. Except Helen would see everything.

The woods aren't very big, only a few acres across, and I trusted Flora to play her part. Choosing the day, however, was tricky. How could I possibly find out when Helen was planning to go? But then, everything just fell into my lap. Helen came into the practice, bringing all the pups for their vaccinations. It was my first time seeing her up close, and she was more attractive than I'd thought. Not classically beautiful exactly, but something about her cheekbones and grey-green eyes caught me off guard. Or maybe the quietness in the way she moved. Quiet and certain.

Anyway, while I was drawing up the vaccines for the vet, they were chatting idly about the weather and then she said it.

'Tuesday looks as if it will be lovely. I think I'll take Flora out in the woods. A little truffle hunt after lunch; she

loves it so. And, if we're lucky, I can add some fresh truffle to the risotto I'm hoping to make for my friends. Mushroom risotto. With a bottle of white wine, or perhaps champagne would be more fitting.' She looked up at me and smiled. 'If you find what you're looking for it's worth celebrating, isn't it?'

'Absolutely.' I grinned back at her. 'It sounds perfect.'

The weather held and Tuesday dawned clear and warm. Just the type of weather that begs you to be outdoors. Roger was easily persuaded to meet in the woods, and I positioned us carefully within a grove of oaks carpeted with moss and fallen leaves. I'm sure just the kind of place where truffles would flourish, like sea anemones blossoming underground.

Applying the truffle oil was easy. I just dabbed some on my fingers from a small bottle in my handbag, and then held his neck while I stared into his eyes. I also rubbed a little in his hair for good measure. My special ingredient. Not fundamental, like flour in bread, but then the best ingredients never are. It's the secret squeeze of lemon, isn't it? The hidden cherry. The hint of saffron, like a horizon remembering the sun. He didn't even notice the smell, maybe because of all the damp forest scents around us, but also because I murmured sweet nothings to him, as if comforting a dog before a storm.

It's not very often in life that things just go according to plan, but every now and then the stars align and everything falls into place. We had sunk down onto a blanket laid out on the leaves. I was dragging things out to give Flora as much time as she needed to find us. Each item of our clothing was removed with deliberation and I whispered, 'Slow down, I want this to last forever.'

But Flora didn't need forever.

I heard her first, probably because I was straining my ears. It's such a guttural sound, to call it a snort is an injustice. It's as if it comes from deep within the earth, like the opening of a chasm, or the first rift as continents break apart and the sea storms into the space torn between them. And then the loud sniffs, mighty nostrils sucking in air, searching, searching. And then finding. I heard a squeal and Roger paused, pulled his face away from mine. But it was too late.

Flora came bounding across the grove, her leash thrashing through the leaves behind her, and then she was upon us. I rolled away but she wasn't interested in me anyway, and thrust herself upon Roger, who shrieked, his voice alarmingly high, as she scabbled at his chest with her trotters and rooted desperately at his head. For a short while it was difficult to tell who the grunts and screams belonged to, as leaves flew about them and Roger seemed to disappear

momentarily beneath the frantic, beige bulk of Flora. But then he was up, blood pouring from his nose, and he turned and fled. Helen was entering the grove now and we both watched him dart through the trees, his white bottom like some kind of misplaced Easter Bunny, and then our eyes met.

I wasn't really sure what to expect. Perhaps red-faced sobbing, or white-faced shock, or good old-fashioned fury. I was prepared to try and be the bigger person, to apologize, and I'd rehearsed a few words about how we loved each other, that love can't be denied. But there was none of that. She looked at me coldly, and then it seemed as if a small smile played across her lips, just for an instant.

She turned to Flora, who was still snuffling in the place where Roger had been; picked up the end of the leash and said quietly, 'Come along, darling.'

I watched them walk away, pulling leaves out of my hair. She walked erect, Flora trotting beside her, now as gentle as a lamb. Then, as Helen reached the edge of the woods, I heard her start to whistle.

I had to go back to work, and it was difficult to concentrate on cutting dogs' nails when I knew my life would be changing imminently. Who knew when I'd be back here? Or if. I drank a cup of instant coffee slowly, savouring the cheap

bitterness of it, as thoughtfully as if I were saying goodbye to a lover. I'd seen the coffee machine at the farm, with the dark coffee beans that smelt like rust and caramel, and a jug of thick cream beside it. That would be how I'd drink my coffee. With cream and half a sugar to enhance the depth of the flavour. I'd noticed the wines too. Old reds that looked black in their bottles, and whites that looked as fresh and crisp as windy days on the beach.

I'd expected Roger to call me, but he obviously couldn't wait. He arrived at the practice and took me in his arms. His face was clean now but there was a purple welt across his cheek and a few grazes on his neck.

'You poor thing,' I whispered, clinging to him, and noticing for the first time the bag on his shoulder.

'I'm all right now,' he said. 'And we don't have to hide anymore.'

'Yes,' I agreed, and summoning my most sympathetic expression asked, 'Has Helen gone? It's over?'

'Oh, yes, of course it's over, my love. But she won't go anywhere, she owns the farm, it's been in her family for generations.' He put his hands around my face. They felt large and clumsy and I controlled the urge to twitch away.

'But then,' I faltered, 'What will you do?'

'Don't worry, little forest fairy,' he said, and kissed my forehead. 'Something will turn up. Love finds a way.'

‘But Helen-’

He kissed me again. I’d never noticed how wet his lips were. ‘Helen is fine. More than fine. She seemed quite distracted actually. Like there was some kind of special occasion.’

‘What kind of special occasion?’ I asked, but with a hollowness in my stomach I realized I already knew the answer.

‘Well, she gave Flora a whole bucket of apples and invited some of her friends to come over for dinner. Said she was making risotto.’

