

HUNTING SEASON

by Lina Hansen

Message from the author: This story is unique, one of the few I ever wrote in Present Tense. I tend to listen to my characters, and this protagonist demanded a different voice...

I raise my rifle; the barrel tracking the guy as he crunches across the frozen ground, towards his car.

Slowly, carefully, I pull the trigger towards me, waiting for the perfect moment. I don't want him inside that flashy SUV of his, but I need that door open. Where the car is standing, close to the fir trees on the other side of the car park, nobody will find the body in a hurry. Suits me to a T, means I can make my getaway without the boys in blue on my heels.

Now!

The man opens the door, and I pull the trigger. A muffled bang comes from the rifle; it jumps in my hands and slams into my shoulder. It's what I expect, so I'm ready for it.

The guy across the parking lot wasn't ready, and he still hasn't quite sussed he's dead. He stares into the darkness, but I know won't spot me. I, however, see him well enough, can watch his eyes roll up in his face and his body crumple behind the car door. His foot twitches once then relaxes in death.

Jolly good. Still, one more thing to do.

I slip the strap of my rifle over my shoulder, put my gloves back on, and check the street. All is quiet. A quick sprint gets me towards the SUV waiting patiently for its owner, its roof light throwing a magical glow onto the now peaceful bundle on one side. A foul smell hits my nose, and I gag. The tosser has shat himself. Holding my breath, I switch off the light.

Perfect. For a while, the corpse is safe from prying eyes.

This one took long enough to shadow, to find a place where I could take him out. In the end, I figured he would return here. To the scene of his crime. A lot of criminals do that, at least the stupid ones among us.

Only, I'm no criminal. I'm an avenger. Every year, I'm on a mission. In the office, they wonder why somebody would book all their vacation in winter. Well folks, I guess you'll never know the truth.

I've given myself a target. Not more than three every season. But when it happens again, I can't stop, can't hold in the rage.

How dare they? No, I can't let such cruelty continue unchecked.

And I won't.

Another mission has been accomplished. Six so far, and Christmas Eve only a few days behind us. There will be more. I have to keep looking. It's not a problem to find them. The buggers are all over the place. It's the tracking that takes the time. That—and the other thing. For my job is not only to punish. My job is to heal, to undo their crimes.

Well, I can't do that, can I? But what I can do is look after the victims. Make sure they are safe and not out there in the snow, the wind, and the darkness. How can anybody do this and still call themselves human? I don't understand it. I just don't.

I crunch my way back across the street and let myself be swallowed into the woods. They don't scare me; they are the territory of the hunter, not the hunted. All I have to do is wait until my eyes have adjusted, then I can move on. Sure, the police will find my tracks. But my boots are nothing special; they won't give me away.

Laughter bubbles up inside. I force it down. Not the right time for a jolly.

What's that?

A howl echoes through the darkness, lonely and longing it tugs at my heart. Not another one! Not so soon!

I swing around to get my bearings. The sound came from somewhere to my right and push my way through the snow-laden branches of the fir trees. So close to the road, I don't dare to use my torch.

I must not be seen.

Another howl, closer than the first. It's coming from the other side of the road, just around the bend. My hearing is excellent, but deserted woodland on a winter's night distorts the echoes until you think you're right at the bottom of a scary pit. And there are few smells to go by. Just a faint tinge of wood smoke and petrol. And the freezing blandness of snow.

Lights slice through the gloom and illuminate the silent oak trees guarding the street. Snow has blown up against them, a furry cover creeping up the bark.

Another howl, much closer now.

Oh no, don't!

For a moment, I see a dark shape lit up by the lights of the truck, followed by a whump. But the vehicle moves on unconcerned and drives away. The motor noise fades into the distance. The wood is silent again.

Apart from a whimper coming from the other side of the road.

I crash through the shrubs, almost forgetting to check for other cars before I dash across. Stupid, stupid, I might be the next one to have an accident!

Then I see it. A tiny dark outline against the greyish heaps of slush lining the road. What shape will it be in?

A quick check. No cars.

I switch on my flashlight, and there it is.

Soggy orange fur and bright yellow eyes reflect the light of the torch. The sharp stench of fear. A cat this time, not a dog. From the noise the poor critter made, I had expected something much bigger.

“Come on, sweetie, let me check.” I shove the flashlight between my teeth and stretch out my gloved hand. My locks have come undone from the bun, they tumble from the hood, blurring my vision. Or perhaps it’s the tears.

I inch my fingers closer. The animal is injured; it might bite. Instead, it purrs. Licks my glove.

More tears prick my eyes.

My fingers prod the furry body, and the cat lets it happen. I see no blood, and when I put my hands under the poor darling to lift her up, the purring hitches once, then continues. Perhaps it’s only a fracture. Or a bruise.

Hopefully.

There’s a rough hemp rope around the animal’s neck. It’s frazzled and frayed at the front. Somehow, the poor kitty must have bitten through the string.

“Bully for you,” I whisper.

Too many are gone before I can find them. Tied to a tree. Frozen to death. Left behind by people who once took them in. As a present. A live gift under the Christmas tree. Until the cuddly pet becomes a burden. Because it wants to be fed. Wants to be loved.

I feel the familiar rage rising inside me.

Calm down!

Rage won’t get me home. It won’t get the injured animal to my partner in crime, the vet. So I swallow down the fury and carry on through the night, the cat tucked into my warm fleece hunting coat. Purring over my heart.

I’ll get her to safety. I’ll find her a new home. A better one. Maybe, I’ll even keep her. But I have so many already...

Once the cat is safe, I will find out where she came from.

Holiday season is hunting season!