

# THE HUNTER

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**John Boston**

Colette Hickman had just turned 15 when her father came home one afternoon almost giddy with excitement. Her mother Dina was already in the kitchen preparing a celebratory meal. She noticed mom had gone nuts with their food stamps and purchased enough food to feed half the neighborhood. Things had not been good for the Hickman family for the past year. Her father had been laid off from his job at a nearby factory, where he had worked for the last ten years. Her mother had to go back to work, working three part-time jobs to keep a roof over their heads. Her father had not taken the change well. He was used to being the provider for the family and the one who had made all the major decisions. He did get another job, but it was only part-time, and he was not making close to what he did at the factory. He had worked with a construction company for several years after graduating high school and was very familiar with home repair and remodeling. He had applied for a job as a maintenance man at a college near Rutland, Vermont. They called him and told him he had the job. This meant he was now a state employee with major perks and benefits. They would now have health insurance and paid time off, like the rest of the civilized world. That meant her family would have to move from Connecticut to the wilds of Vermont, a state she had only been to once. It was cold and very sparsely populated. The only major city was Burlington and that was an hour and a half away. Her life had suddenly gone from bad to worse. All her friends lived in Hartford, including her best friend in the whole world, Janine. This was going to be a big change for everyone, especially for her. Her father's first day of work was in two weeks. They barely had time to pack. Her parents found a single-wide trailer for rent on the outskirts of town, located on the edge of the Green Mountain National Forest. Colette had never spent more than ten minutes in the woods, now she was surrounded by it. She knew they had to leave. The economy in New England in the fall of 1994 was terrible. There were jobs, but none that paid a livable wage. Most people she knew had to work two jobs just to make ends meet. Her mom was her go-to, but this time, she would find little comfort in her mother's arms.

"Honey, this is a very big deal. This is a big opportunity for your father. That factory job was killing him."

"Yeah, I know. I wish there was some way I could stay here. All my friends are here."

"Honey, you'll make new friends. We found a new place to live. It's kind of out in the middle of nowhere, but until we sell the house, it's all we can afford. I know this is a big change for you. It's a big change for all of us. Just try and be positive. Your father is so happy. I haven't seen him this happy in a while. He's cut out for so much more than stocking shelves overnight at a grocery store. That job is driving him crazy." she said as she pulled her dish out of the oven.

Colette knew it was pointless to try and resist. The decision had been made. She broke the news to Janine that night. She loved Janine like a sister.

"That sucks. Who the hell am I going to sit with at lunch? Everybody else in that school sucks?" she complained.

"I know. I have to start all over again. I don't think I'm very good at making friends."

"Well, you better not replace me with anyone else. You better call at least twice a week. I don't want you to forget about me."

Colette wasn't even sure the house had a phone. She just assumed it did. She figured if worse came to worse, she could always write a letter.....something she hadn't done in years.

The next two weeks were like a blur for Colette and her parents. Her younger brother Jeremy was excited to make the move. He hated his school and had gotten into several fights with the other students.

"Good riddance. Hartford sucks. I hear the Whalers are trying to leave. If the Whalers leave, then what the hell would be the point of living there?" he said on the three-hour drive from their home to Rutland. She looked with sadness at their old house as they left the neighborhood. The house she had grown up in would now be just a memory. She helped her dad hang the for sale sign on the front lawn before they left.

"Somebody will buy it, it's got good bones." said her dad as they pulled out of the driveway

Colette knew she was headed into uncharted territory here. Vermont in 1994 may as well have been a different country as far as she was concerned. Colette's real passion was working with animals. She spent all of her free time volunteering at the local animal shelter. To her, they were not just animals, they were like her children. She had a soft spot in her heart for the abused and the unwanted. She once spent the entire night with a kitten who almost froze to death. She held it in her arms and just kept it company all night. Her parents were clearly not *animal people* in any sense of the word.

"Colette, I can barely afford to feed you and Jeremy, how the hell am I going to feed a dog?" her father said to her once after asking if she could bring home a stray cat.

Her mother was no help. She just backed up her father.

"Honey, maybe when we have a little more money we can talk about it, just not right now," she said.

Colette didn't really have any friends except for Janine. They both loved animals. She even befriended a giant boa constrictor someone had abandoned. People would often ask her why she spent so much time with animals and her response was always the same.

*Cause when you make a friend with an animal, you've made a friend for life.*

Their new living arrangements were less than ideal. It was almost ten degrees cooler in Rutland than back home in Hartford. The town was depressing. A local lumber mill had recently closed and the town was reeling. Over a hundred jobs had been lost and a hundred people were out

gunning for her dad's job at the university. She was enrolled at Rutland High School the next day. The high school was a fraction of the size she had previously attended. It had just opened and had a grand total of just six hundred students. Her class had a hundred and twenty. She was nervous but did her best to show it. A few students smiled at her, but no one talked to her, except this weird kid who was an exchange student from Germany. She went about her day, barely looking at anyone, just trying to become another face in the crowd. Her math teacher, Mr. Allen made her stand up and introduce herself, something she absolutely dreaded. She just went to the library for lunch and read magazines. She was starving but didn't want to sit alone, not on her first day. She had gym after lunch and had to play dodgeball. She didn't do much dodging and was out in the first round. None of the other girls even tried to talk to her. That was fine with her. She didn't really want to talk to them either.

The only highlight of her day was coming home from school, stepping off the bus, and seeing three deer in her front yard. Colette was in awe. She had never seen a deer before. They looked like magical creatures out of some fairy tale. She figured they were at the house because they were hungry or needed help. She knew better than to try and approach them. She went into the house and looked for whatever she could find for them to eat. She found some old pot roast with potatoes. She didn't know if deer could eat meat or not, but they looked hungry, so just went for it. She put the dishes on the back porch and closed the door. The deer immediately began smelling the food and walked over. They were hesitant at first, then started playing with the dishes and finally, started eating. She found a box that contained her encyclopedias and began searching for what deer ate. She struck pay dirt with apples. There were a few apple trees in her backyard. She ran out back grabbed as many of them as she could, and ran back to the porch. The deer scattered when she approached. She put as many apples in the dishes and on the steps as she could, then went back into the house. She watched the deer devour the apples. She almost cried when she saw the looks on their faces. The animals were grateful.

*They were saying thank you, without actually saying it.* She knew that look all too well. The deer knew where to come when they needed help. They had a human friend in Colette.

Her brother Jeremy came home about half an hour later. He quickly went to the fridge to look for a snack. He saw her sitting at the table, eating a bowl of cereal.

"How did your first day go?" she asked

"Fine, I guess. I didn't talk to anyone and no one talked to me."

"I hear you. None of them even tried to talk to me. Oh, well. We won't be here for very long, anyway."

"Huh, what do you mean?"

"I'm going to be sixteen pretty soon. I can graduate early cause I took all those AP classes last year. Once I graduate, I'm out of here." she said.

"Right.....where are you going to go?"

"I don't know. California, maybe. Florida. Someplace where the weather suits my clothes."

"You're not going anywhere. You're stuck here with me and Mom and dad."

"That's what you think," she said as she went back to her cereal.

Jeremy went to the living room to play video games. They had just a basic TV with an antenna and got a total of six stations. Life in rural Vermont, before the invention of the internet, was almost unimaginable for modern people. The snow was so bad in the winter, you could be snowed in for days on end. The power would always go out and worst of all *your neighbors were not going to help you one bit.*

Colette had learned the hard way that Vermonters don't take very kindly to outsiders. No one in her last high school cared where you were from, you were either cool, or you weren't. Vermont was a different story. If your parents were big whigs in town, then their children followed suit. There was a hierarchy in the high school that took her a while to figure out. She later found out that the Crabtree kids moved to Rutland when they were just toddlers. ....*and were still considered outsiders by the people in town.*

To Colette though, none of that mattered. She had every intention of leaving this place and spreading her wings once she graduated. She had no idea where she was going, or how she would get there, but none of that mattered. All that mattered was getting the hell out of here, as quickly as she could. She would even go back to Hartford and Janine in a second if she could. None of this made any sense to her. It was as if one day, her parents simply decided to completely change everything about their lives and hers as well. She was an unwilling participant in this game and she wanted out as fast as possible.

The days turned into weeks, which turned into months. It was now the middle of winter in one of the darkest and coldest places in America. Jeremy had joined his local hockey team and her mom had gotten a job at a local bakery. Her dad's job had turned into a little more than he had bargained for. He knew he was stuck there and it only made things worse. Dinner time is when he would vent and this evening, he clearly had a lot of venting to do.

"I just don't get it. I try and talk to them, but they just don't seem to care. The boss wanted to hire his son, but his boss overruled him and hired me, cause they don't like each other. I mean they really don't like each other. Here I am caught in the middle. The job is easy enough. It's the people games that are driving me nuts. I worked at that factory for ten years. No one cared where you were from or what family you happened to be born into. You either did your job or you were gone. Here, I just feel like there are a whole bunch of rules I have to follow that have nothing to do with the job. I work with these two idiots who are relatives of the boss. Neither one of them can fix anything. They take two-hour lunches every day and show up for work drunk and hung over every Monday morning and that's no big deal, but I misplace a screwdriver and I get written up. These people are something else.

"Do you think they're going to fire you?"

"Oh, god no. No one else on the crew knows how to do anything. I'm the only one who does repairs. The rest of them just sit in the office all day. If they lose me, they know they have to get off their butts and actually do something. See, I am on probation for my first year. All I have to do is make it off my probationary period and then I'm in. It would take an act of Congress to get

me fired. One of the guys on my crew brought a lounge chair into work the day he got signed off from being a probationary employee. A freggin lounge chair. He knew there was nothing they could do to him at that point."

"so, all you have to do is make it a year and you're set?" asked Jeremy

"Yup. One year from my start date and then I'm in. I just hope I can make it a year."

"I'm sure you'll be fine. You know your job better than they do," said Mom

"It's just the people games. I have to be good at playing people games and I'm terrible at it. I've had to bite my tongue several times already. I know they're testing me, but what else can I do? I've just got to play along until my year is up. They're renovating a dorm building next month. That should keep me busy for the rest of my year. The boss said there is going to be overtime."

"Good, no more food stamps or food pantries. It's embarrassing," said Jeremy

"It's just temporary, son. No one is more embarrassed than me." said Dad.

Colette knew her father was ashamed of having to rely on handouts. She couldn't believe how many people she knew standing in line at the food bank. A lot of people were struggling, not just the Hickman family. She knew her only move was to wait it out. She just had to finish high school, then she could finally begin to live her life. She could almost see the finish line.

Colette's school life didn't change very much over the next few months. She had no real friends except for Janine, whom she called as often as possible. Saturday mornings were their *catch up time* and they made good use of it. Her dad would tell her to get off the phone in case work called and she would have to hang up. Her only friends in Vermont were her animals. Deer, raccoons, squirrels, birds, etc. It seemed the word had gotten out. If an animal needed help, they knew exactly where to go. Her mom took several photos of her hand feeding the deer in her backyard. Her animals were like her children. She felt more comfortable around them, than she did around people. Animals don't judge, or talk behind your back. They accept you the way you are, with all of your flaws. Her grandmother once told her that animals exist to remind us of God's love, something that she had kept with her over the years. She was not expecting her father to come home late one evening and break the news to the family. Good news for some is terrible news for others. Colette felt like she had just been hit with a brick.

"I got invited to go on the deer hunt." her dad said as he took off his coat and boots.

"Huh?" she said dumbfounded.

"The head of the maintenance dept wants me to go with him and his son on their deer hunt this weekend. This is huge." said her dad almost giddy with excitement.

"So, what did you tell him?"

"I said of course, I'd be happy to go."

"You are going to kill a deer? What did the deer ever do to you?"

"Honey, it's no big deal. You should have seen the look on everyone's faces when he asked me. They didn't know whether to shit or go sailing."

"You might have to actually shoot a deer?" said Colette, failing to see how this was good news.

"I might."

"Have you ever shot a deer before?" she asked, not really wanting to hear the answer.

"Nope."

"So, why are you going to start now?"

"Honey, it's just one hunt, with my boss's boss. I get in good with him and I'm set. I could even become a supervisor. No more handouts for us after that." her dad said, looking in the fridge for food.

"Dad, you don't have to do this. You can just say no, right?"

"I suppose I could, but then I'd miss out on this great opportunity. The season starts tomorrow, so stay the hell out of the woods for the next ten days, okay?" he said making himself a sandwich.

Colette went up to her room and closed the door. She put her head in her pillow and began to cry. Her father was turning into the type of person she despised. He was going to kill an innocent animal just for fun. To her, these were the types of people that were just plain wrong. She didn't want to hear about ecosystem stabilization or many of the positive effects on the rest of the animals from the hunting season. To her, this was no different than killing an innocent person. Animals have feelings too. She just hoped and prayed that her father came up empty-handed during his hunt. If he wanted to go hunting, he could kill flies and hornets with a swatter. Using a rifle to kill animals just sounded like murder to her.

Her father told the rest of the family over dinner, how this was quite an honor for a rookie employee. Clearly, the big boss saw a lot of potential with him. No one else on his crew ever got asked to go on a hunting trip with him.

"Honey, you've never been hunting before in your life. It's going to be freezing this weekend." said mom

"They have a trailer in the woods on private property they use. It's got propane heat and sleeps like six people. We'll be fine."

"Dad, have you ever fired a gun before?" asked Jeremy

"Yeah, you forget I was in the army."

"Oh yeah. I forgot."

"Dad, are you sure you want to do this? I mean you aren't bothered at all by taking an innocent animal's life?"

"If it means I can keep my job and get promoted, then no, it definitely does not bother me."

"How would you like it if some higher power just came to Earth and started hunting us?" she asked

"Maybe they are. Lots of people go missing each year under mysterious circumstances."

"Come on, you know what I mean. It's not right. Animals feel pain and suffer just like we do."

"I take it you do not approve of my little trip this weekend?"

"No, I do not," she said sternly

"Well, when you're older, you'll understand," he said and went back to eating his dinner.

Colette just played with her food and stewed for the next several minutes. Her father was going to commit animal murder and would never be charged, in fact, he'd probably get a pat on the back from his other animal murderer friends. Birds of a feather flock together. She asked to be excused and went up to her room. The more she thought about it, the more upset she became. Her father could be anything, a thief, a bum, even a murderer and she could forgive him, but this in her opinion, this was the gravest sin of all. Taking an innocent animal's life for simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. She could never look at her father the same way again. She had to do something, she just didn't know what. Things were never going to be the same between her and her father ever again.

"Dad, I don't want you go to out this weekend. It's not right."

"Honey, I don't want to go out with them, I just don't think I have any choice," he said thumbing through a magazine.

"You are okay with being a killer?"

"Honey, it's a deer, it's not a person."

"It is to me."

"I'm not doing this because I want to kill a deer. I'm doing this so I can keep my job and we can have a roof over our heads. These guys can be a little bit unpredictable. It wouldn't be good for me or us if I were to turn him down."

"I'd rather you get fired. I'd rather you do anything but kill an innocent animal," she said tearing up.

"It's one deer. I probably won't even get one, I'm just there to keep the old man from falling asleep and getting hypothermia."

"I just don't understand how you're okay with all of this."

"I'm okay with it because I have no choice," he said and went back to reading his magazine.

"You are wrong about one thing, though," she said.

"What's that?"

"About me understanding as I get older. That's not true. I'll never understand how a person can do what you're about to do, no matter how old I get." she said

Friday night, her dad never came home. She helped him find a sleeping bag, a flash lite, and a canteen. She also made sure he had extra socks and a spare pair of boots in case he got wet. Her dad tried to hug her, but she pulled away. She could tell he was hurt, but he didn't say anything and loaded his gear into the family wagon.

"Where are you going to put the deer after you kill it?" asked mom

"Right on top here. That's why I got the tarp," he said pointing to the roof of the car.

"Mom, please don't let him do this," she said

"I tried dear. His mind is made up."

She watched her dad pull out of the driveway and creep down their snow-covered driveway towards the main road. She went back inside and called Janine. They talked for almost two hours until her mother told her to get off the line. She reluctantly hung up. She could tell that something was off with Janine. She listened and talked, but it seemed like her mind was someplace else, as if she didn't want to be on the line with her. Over the next few months, they would talk less and less, until one day, they stopped talking all together. Janine had a boyfriend and had made new friends and over time, so did Colette. It bothered her at first, but then she realized that she couldn't just live in the past, she had to live for the present and future. Losing Janine hurt, but the new friends she made helped heal the wound. For a while, she had no one to turn to, except her animals. They never abandoned her or were too busy to spend time with her. She realized then, that her best friends in life would all have four legs.

Dad was gone for only two days. They were the longest two days of Colette's young life. She couldn't sleep and did nothing but sit on the couch and watch TV. Her soul was aching and she had no idea how to fix it. She was angry at her father, but she also understood. Dad's job was very important to him. He did not do well when he was unemployed. He liked being the provider and the caretaker of the house. Mom helped too, but it was always Dad who was in the driver's seat, the rest of them were just along for the ride. She and her father never had the best relationship. He seemed much closer to Jeremy than to her. Dad was a big hockey fan and so was Jeremy. It seemed as if they always had something to talk about. They would sit in front of the TV and watch hockey games when they were on TV. She would sit with them but felt as if she was interrupting something. They didn't hate one another, they just didn't have much in common, either. As she got older and grew into her womanhood, she had hoped her mother would step up, but so far, that hadn't happened. Her mother was a devout Catholic and she had made it quite



clear that she wanted nothing to do with the church, or its clergy. That did not go over very well at all. Her father was Catholic as well but like her mom. She felt like a stranger within her own family. She wanted a family of her own one day, with lots of animals thrown into the mix. She knew that her only way to truly find herself and to be happy was to leave this place. Leave the cold and darkness and go someplace where it's never cold. Someplace with palm trees and constant sunlight. Someplace with beaches and surfers, where everyone is just having a good time, not struggling to survive. She had decided to leave as soon as she graduated and head out to California. She would miss her family, but the sky was the limit out there. She planned on just camping on the beach if she ran out of money. Their lives were becoming parallel ones, instead of intersecting ones, a trend that would not correct itself as they all got older. Colette wanted to be the center of attention instead of just the third wheel for once in her life. She looked out her window and could see the snow falling on the ground. It felt like it was creating a virtual prison for six months. To her, snow was not beautiful, it was like being smothered by a white blanket. A cold and dark, white blanket. Summers in Vermont were amazing, but the winters were brutal, especially for someone like her.

Her dad came home Sunday afternoon with his rifle and gear. He looked exhausted. He came into the living room and took off his boots as he sat down on his favorite chair. Everyone wanted to hear about his hunting experience, especially Colette.

"Well, how did it go?" asked Mom as she handed him a beer.

"Exhausting.....cold and exhausting. We got two deer. The boss got one of them. Needless to say, he was quite pleased with himself.

"How about you dad, did you shoot any deer?" asked Jeremy

"Me, oh no. I just sat out with the boss in his tree stand and froze my butt off. He wanted me to take the shot, but I passed. I told him it was his deer, I was just along for the ride."

"Wow, so you had a chance to kill a deer and you passed?" he asked

"Yeah, I'm no hunter. I guess when it came right down to it, I just couldn't do it. I could never harm one of God's innocent creatures." he said as he sipped his beer.

Colette almost leaped out of her chair and threw her arms around her father. She had never been so proud of him. She had never loved him more. It turns out she and her father had a lot more in common than she thought. They spent the rest of the evening, just hanging out and talking and laughing about her father's terrible hunting skills.

"I got lost in the woods. It was kind of scary. Fortunately for me, Larry, one of my coworkers who went with us, stunk so bad that I was actually able to follow his stench back to camp. Lucky me. He said

The previous two days were forgotten about and though she was never going to be a daddy's girl, there was an understanding between the two of them that was more powerful than anything she had ever experienced.

She made good on her word to leave Vermont three days after graduation. She had worked for three years at a local farm and had saved up a few thousand dollars which enabled her to buy a car. She drove to California by herself and spent the first month hanging out in Santa Monica and Venice Beach. She met interesting people from all over the world. She spent three fabulous years in California. She met boys and got to experience things she could only dream about back in Vermont. She kept in touch with her family and on that horrible day in August 2000, she got news that her father had been diagnosed with terminal liver cancer. She dropped the phone and just started to sob on the beach. Life was so unfair. She moved back home to spend time with him. She watched him go from a big, strong man to a weakling who could barely get out of bed as the cancer destroyed his body. It got harder and harder for her as his condition worsened. It devastated the family. His hospice nurse said he would pass soon, so he gathered the family into his bedroom for one final goodbye. The hardest thing she ever had to do in her life was not cry like a baby during her father's final hours. He knew he was passing, he just wanted to let everyone know he was going to be okay.

"I'll be with Jesus soon," he said.

"We will always love you, dad. I won't ever stop loving you until the moment I leave this Earth," she said, fighting back the tears.

"Sorry to have to leave you guys this way. The man upstairs and I are going to have a very lengthy chat about this one," he said with a weak voice.

"It's not fair. None of this is fair," said Jeremy angrily

He reached out and motioned for them to come forward. They all put their arms around their father's frail and weak body. She couldn't hold back any longer, the tears started to flow down her cheeks.

"That day I went hunting with my boss. I had a chance to kill the deer, but I didn't. Being your dad was more important to me than looking good in front of my boss. I knew I couldn't let you down."

She didn't say anything and just continued to sob harder. She realized then, at that moment why she was really upset. *It's the things you don't say to one another that hurt more than the things you do.* She had wasted all those years and all that time on herself when she could have gotten to know her father. He was a good man, who only wanted her to be proud of him, that's why he worked so hard, so she would never have to do the things he did and have a better life than the one he was given. That was the only way he could show his affection.

Her dad died the next day after lunch. She never did go back to California. She knew her family needed her and that's where she stayed. Her father was cremated and she kept his ashes in their living room. As the years passed, and Colette got married with children of her own, she never forgot to tell them about their grandfather and how he loved them. She just wanted her father to love her and he just wanted the same. It was something so simple and yet neither of them was ever able to figure it out before he died. She made certain she would not make the same mistake with her children. Time is precious and the love we create is the only thing that matters in this world.