

A Perfect Shot

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A Perfect Shot

Creating a new life for herself...

Renee, having spent a lifetime career as a war photographer, has earned her retirement and moved to one of America's beautiful wilderness areas.

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A Perfect Shot

by Vanayssa Somers

Renee reached down, grasped the rope attaching the rowboat to the pier, and untied Blue Rose from its moorings.

Holding onto the rope as she walked toward the small craft, its back end barely touching the lake, she pushed it out a little, made sure the paddles were firmly in place. Clambering into Rose, as she called her little wooden friend, she settled her hind end onto the middle seat, placing the paddles in the oarlocks. She shoved one paddle hard against the gravel of the shoreline to get away onto the clear, smooth surface of water, and made sure her backpack was safely stowed under the stern seat.

Her expensive cameras and photo lens were wrapped in waterproof coverings, packed where they'd always been packed, in her camo packsack. When she'd been on assignment in the Middle East, she'd carried the tools of her profession in that same backpack, a discreet color that would blend in if enemies thought they spotted something worth shooting at.

"I really should get something brighter for travelling around here at home," she muttered aloud to herself. "If I got lost or something, it would be better to have bright red. Maybe pink. Or yellow. Something that can be spotted from the air, for example. Maybe I'll think about that. But I won't be getting lost anytime soon."

She soon settled into the pleasant, slightly demanding, job of stroke-and-relax, stroke-and-relax, moving further out to the middle of the lake.

She set the paddles down into the boat bottom and sighed, relaxing and looking around with the usual stream of pleasure the perfection of landscape brought her.

Surrounded by forest-clad mountains, the lake was pristine, reflecting the surrounding scenery in detail. High overhead, the noon sun, not so hot in autumn, lit the entire scene and lent a quality of peace and comfort to her soul.

Her soul. Suffering from a kind of post-battle syndrome, not PTSD, not that bad, but she'd taken a fair time to get her usual calm aplomb back after returning from what would be her last trip abroad as a war correspondent. She still found herself shaking as her mind wandered the backtracks of memory, the roar of bombs and rockets, the dead bodies, the screams, the falling buildings, the piles of rubble...

She shivered and put it from her mind. That was then. This was now.

"I coped with what I had to cope with and now it's over. I won't have to ever go back to those places, I'm retired from all that," she reminded herself, returning to the peace of the scenery around her.

She picked up the paddles and began to move across the lake to the opposite side. Today, she was hoping to come across a bear, perhaps even the wolf pack if she was lucky. From a safe distance of course. Before buying a cabin at the far end of the lake and setting it up to use seasonally for wildlife photography, she'd hired a guide to show her the ropes. Her territory might not be Taliban territory nowadays, but wilderness dangers were just as threatening for the unprepared.

One thing she'd learned early on in her previous life, her life as a war photographer: never go out unprepared.

She carried a couple of weapons, the basic things, a .22 rifle and a good knife. Not that she'd ever have to use them, she felt sure. Prevention was worth a pound of cure, that was her lifetime motto. And it had always paid off.

Binoculars raised to her eyes, she followed the shoreline from the south western end to the north. Something moved. She froze, leaning forward a bit. A bear? Didn't look quite right...

Something else moved, a little lighter in color, and then she had it. The wolf pack. She'd heard about this pack, composed of several family members of different shades. Whether they'd gotten mixed with dog or coyote, no one knew, but they were a mixture for sure.

She sat very still, far away on the glassy surface, binoculars pinned to her eyes and her body unmoving. Renee had perfected the art of stillness, even in discomfort, for long periods of time, over her many years of professional cameraman in one job or another.

Should she paddle to that shoreline and step off into those woods? The wolves had plenty to eat in these parts, the chance of them feeling interest in a grown adult human was very low. She decided to follow them just a bit, then climb into a suitable tree and wait for a while. There were no guarantees, but her gut told her she'd get a good shot today.

She glanced back at her packsack, tucked under the stern seat. If she could find the right tree, she could haul her stuff up mostly on her back, a couple things around her waist. It had to be the right tree, with enough foliage to hide her from whatever came along.

Having made her decision, she reached for her rifle and moved the packsack forward, searching for the outside pocket with the ammo. She was confident of her safety but it paid to be doubly sure. She loaded the .22 and put the safety on, lay it along the bottom of the boat beneath the seats. Got her knife, a good quality blade, out of the packsack and strapped the harness across her shoulder and chest, the knife in its protective sheath across her chest for quick use.

Renee had never had to use the knife, but one of the soldiers she'd gone to the battlefield with, inside the confines of a tank, had talked to her about getting one. She believed in listening to experts, and that twenty-six year old veteran of more than one deadly confrontation knew what he was talking about.

She hoped, if she ever needed it, she'd handle herself effectively. Perhaps someday she should take some lessons if she could find a place that offered them.

Anyway, she was as safe as common sense could make her, and she'd sort out her cameras when she got to shore.

She was well aware of what many had said to her over the years: you'll probably never see any trouble with a wild animal; if you ever need your weapons, it will be for trouble with a human.

But grizzlies were on the move these days. They were turning up in places they'd never been seen before. It would be terrific to get a shot of a grizzly. Especially in these parts where they weren't supposed to be.

The pleasant effort of paddling the still lake to the northwest end settled her mind, got her focused. She thought about her cameras and her long lens.

She'd once damaged an expensive lens heaving herself and her backpack up a sturdy tree in an English forest. She'd learned to take more care with organizing her gear after that.

Pulling Blue Rose up on the gravelly shingle, she tugged until it was safe from drifting, and then made sure she tied a good knot as she secured the rope to some willow trees lining the shore.

Her mind was fully on her tasks and on the hope that she'd get a great shot of something fabulous. It didn't have to be large, a good shot of a raccoon would do. But she wanted to start her time at the cabin with at least one good result from her first outing.

She stood straight, adjusting the pack on her back, shifting a bit to get the knife in the most convenient spot across her chest. Adjusted her yellow baseball cap on gray-gold curls. Stood, strong and sure in her well-worn hiking boots, boots she'd chosen not only for hiking slippery rocks and wet leafy trails, but also for a good grip on a tree trunk. Some she'd seen working would take their boots off and tie them round their neck to ascend to the forest canopy. But she'd picked boots suitable for the task so she could just leave them on. Easier and handier if she suddenly had to move fast for some reason.

In the safety of a large deciduous tree with plenty of greenery and branches to disguise her presence, she always felt comfortable except for one animal – the cougar. If a big cat realized she was up there, she'd have to try to either scare it away with a rifle shot over its head, or, even worse, destroy the animal. There were a lot of cougars around. And you never saw them unless they came right into town. But walking a trail, many people had been silently stalked by a curious, hopeful big cat looking for a meal, perhaps a medium sized dog. People never knew or dreamed such danger walked beside them, hidden only by a screen of bushes.

But putting these thoughts aside, Renee set out happily along one of the deer trails she spied, knowing the wolf pack had most likely chosen that very trail to follow as it hunted these familiar woods, the long-time home of the pack.

She walked along, not making an effort to be really quiet, for she wanted any bears feeding on berries nearby to know she was there, and go into hiding. She thought about a dog. She needed a companion for sure, and though she would not be living in the cabin through the long hard winters, she still wanted a furry friend to care for and love through the seasonal changes and challenges of lakeside living.

Her mind briefly turned to her condo in Seattle and the caretaker of the building who'd promised to send on her mail to the small local post office in the town twenty-five miles away. Old Duncan would take care of things, she knew that. She thought of her red geraniums in white tubs on the balcony. He'd water them, she knew, and felt no pull on her heartstrings for her pleasant town life. Right now, the busyness of getting settled in her cabin was exciting and filled her soul. Whether or not she'd ever stay on the lake for a whole winter she had no idea right now. Maybe once she knew a few people, had a social base built.

Her mental meanderings brought her to a curve in the trail and she paused, eyeing the woods around her. This might be a good spot to settle in and get her cameras set up.

A deep male voice spoke, startling in the forest stillness. "Hi there. Looking for wildlife?"

She whirled, stunned that another human could possibly be there beside her, unnoticed.

"Uh...where are you?" she asked nervously, glad her voice was quiet and calm as it came out of her throat. She craned her neck, looking around.

A figure stepped out of a screen of trees, seemingly out of nowhere. She stared at the tall, well-built man who materialized in front of her.

His gaze was cool and steady, intense blue eyes in a face framed by coal-black hair. A fuzz of beard shadow gave the face a dangerous sense. He stood a few inches taller than she, and he cocked his head, looking down at her, his thumbs hitched in his jeans pockets. The worn, cracked leather of his quality jacket spoke of years spent in just such surroundings.

Outdoors. This was an outdoors guy, whoever he was.

She noted the hard line of his mouth, a slash across the lower part of his face. Not a friendly sort.

A heavy sigh escaped her chest. "Well, I wasn't expecting to see anyone out here, to be honest. I was a bit startled to hear your voice coming out of nowhere. Yes, I'm looking for wildlife. Are you just out hiking?"

Renee felt a little frisson of, not quite fear, but anxiety. She was very alone out here with this stranger, who looked extremely unsympathetic.

“Sort of. I have a blind here.” He gestured with his arm toward the leafy expanse behind him. “I write books about wildlife, about being outdoors, basically. Ash Hagedorn. I spend a lot of time sitting still in the middle of a bunch of trees. And you?”

“Renee McDonald. I was hoping to see the wolf pack. Thought I saw them coming up, maybe, this trail, earlier, when I was out on the lake. I hear they may be mixed with dog or coyote. The only wolves I’ve seen before were the Grays.”

He eyed her rifle, slung over her shoulder, and his eyes dropped to her chest, but not for the usual reason. The harness with her knife fixed on it for handiness in a moment of dire need stretched across her body. The handle was exposed at an angle which gave her the best chance of a quick draw if needed.

“I see you are well equipped for the woods.” His voice was cold. “Well, if you will excuse me, I’ll return to my perch. I won’t wish you luck with hunting. There are probably a number of hunters around, as the season just opened. Be careful that yellow cap of yours doesn’t get mistaken for a rack of horns. Take care.”

And just like that, he turned rudely on his heel and disappeared into the shrubbery as quickly as he’d appeared.

She stood, staring in surprise at his sudden departure.

Well. Of all the nerve. Hunting! He thought she was hunting...heading into the woods to kill something.

Maybe she should carry a camera around her neck so no one else thought the same thing. But then, that was just too much stuff, especially if she was hanging on to a sturdy branch, swinging herself and her pack up into a tree.

Disgusted and now, with her good mood evaporated, she strode off huffily along the trail, turning the corner and moving away from the rude and, yes, ignorant guy sitting in his blind. She knew what it took to sit still for hours. She’d learned it on the job thousands of miles from this place. When it could cost her her very life if she moved a muscle. Or sneezed.

As she walked, she couldn’t help but compare, and think about the ways his pastime matched her own experiences. She, too, had sat in blinds, but the creatures she was hiding from were all too human. And she’d huddled inside many a tank with a gang of youthful soldiers, their easygoing manner covering a level of alertness unmatched by most people anywhere. She’d squeezed herself into a corner of the metal monster lumbering along desert roads, knowing as the soldiers did, that every moment might be their last. Roadside bombs were everywhere.

But you couldn’t let that stop you. You had your job to do. They all did, and she did, too. They shared the same dangers, but used different tools. Their weapons, her cameras. But they’d taught her about weapons, too, and she’d been a careful and serious student.

Few women here at home knew what she knew. But the nerve of the guy, assuming instantly she was out to kill his precious wildlife, just because she was...and there her thoughts stopped, because she had to admit that she looked like a hunter, armed for anything that might come along.

Then the humour of the situation hit her, and she began to grin, chuckling to herself. If she ran into him on the way back, she’d be sure to have a camera at the ready. They could shoot a photo of each other. The image made her laugh out loud.

“He’s, like, too serious for his own good,” she decided, aloud.

She stopped and looked around. Bending a little, she peered down at the low shrubs, wondering if she could see any signs of the pack moving this way.

Her eye caught on something so compelling, she froze where she stood. A rotting log, covered in moss, lay a short distance off in the undergrowth. Shafts of golden sunlight streamed down through tall, ancient tree branches. A soft wind moved the trees, causing shadows to flutter across the log as it lay there, the autumn sun lighting up its knots and old bark.

And sitting on a large knot in the old log was a robin, its red breast shining where the sun touched it. It bent its head, finding a bug buried in wet cracks in the wood, lifting its head to enjoy a small feast. It hopped on a bit, intent on finding more goodies hiding in the dark crevices of the broken bark.

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