

The Moose By April White

“I smell an animal.” Dallas spun to face the sound, reaching out a hand to hold me in place.

She signaled silence, I nodded, and then I followed her slow, precise footsteps around the side of the shed. I was concentrating so hard that I almost collided with her when she stopped. Her stance was tense, and she looked ready to bolt. “What is it?” I breathed into her ear.

She stepped to the side just enough to let me move up next to her. Then I stopped breathing entirely. Not even ten feet away from us stood a bull moose, stock-still, its nose in the air, maybe trying to catch our scent or maybe just searching for food. The creature was massive, like a Salvador Dali elephant. It stood taller than a horse, with long, knobby legs, a rough patchy coat, and a massive rack of antlers.

Dallas never took her eyes off the beast as her hand reached for mine and she pulled me back—slowly, so slowly my muscles protested—until we reached the front door to the cabin.

“Inside,” she whispered, holding the door for me. She didn’t even pause to knock the snow from her boots—just kicked them off in the vestibule and pulled me in after her.

When the door was closed behind us, she finally seemed to breathe.

The fire in the wood stove crackled, and I peeled off my coat. I watched Dallas, worried, and when she still didn’t speak, I finally asked, “Are you okay?”

Her eyes met mine, and she seemed to relax a little more. “I told you moose are dangerous.”

“Yeah, during calving and rutting seasons. Has calving season already started?”

She shook her head. “Kind of like everything else in the Yukon, it starts around mid-May.” She inhaled deeply and sat on the bench closest to the fire to warm her hands. She didn’t look at me as she spoke. “I’m a little superstitious about moose sightings.”

“Good or bad?”

She met my gaze and gave me a half-smile. It was something. “Not great,” she said.

I settled in beside her and put my arm around her shoulder, hoping that the tacit permission I’d been granted with the beginnings of friendship wouldn’t be revoked.

She put her head on my chest and looked up at me. “We’re not doing this, Oliver.” She gestured between us. “This isn’t a thing.”

“Not a thing. Got it,” I said with a smile that masked my hope for something more.

She sighed and rolled her eyes. “Your charming smile should come with a warning label.”

“You think I’m charming?” I batted my eyelashes and grinned at her.

“It’s not a compliment,” she said, shaking her head.

I laughed and hugged her closer to my side. She allowed it, and I pretended I hadn’t noticed so she didn’t pull away.

“Tell me about the moose,” I said quietly.

The silence settled back in, broken only by the crackle of the fire until she spoke again.

“I was twenty-one and had just graduated from college the fall I guided my last moose hunt.” Her voice was tight, like it wasn’t used to sharing. “The client was one of those entitled rich guys who’d hunted around the world putting a bullet into every big-game animal he could find. He hated the fact that I knew more about the bush than he ever would.”

I smirked at her matter-of-fact tone. I knew it wasn’t a boast.

“He was determined to be the big alpha hunter,” she continued, “and if he could have gotten me fired, he would have. I never did find out if he tried, because it was my last guide job, and I left the Yukon right after.”

I fought my caveman instincts. Dallas didn’t need me to be indignant on her behalf, so I stayed quiet.

It was getting dark, and she picked up a poker to open the wood stove door. The heat and light from the stove warmed my feet and cast a glow over the woman by my side. She was the survivalist and I was her student, but in the time we’d spent at the winter cabin, the walls she’d so carefully built around herself had begun to crack, and I was fascinated by the glimpses she gave me.

She nestled back into my shoulder, and I was glad she couldn’t see my face. She probably would have distanced herself just to make a point. “The guy was determined to take down a prize-winning rack, and every bull moose I saw with antlers over fifty inches was deemed ‘too small’ because I was the one to spot it. But then, just as the light was going, he spotted a young male standing across a river. I’d already seen and dismissed the moose as illegal, but the client insisted he was a full-grown bull. He shouldered his rifle, and I pushed it away. Then he turned it on me.”

I sucked in a breath. “Bastard.” I shoved the caveman back into the cave and bit my tongue.

Her voice got a faraway sound, like memory was the only thing backing it. “*You shoot it*, he said. *Use your Indian hunting rights to get me my moose.*” She seemed to come back to herself then. “He had a calculating look on his face, like he was trying to decide if he could get away with shooting me.”

I ground my teeth against growled words.

“And then he said, *Never mind, I’ll just put it on your tag anyway*, and he turned the gun on the young bull and shot him.”

Fury pumped through me as Dallas took a steadying breath and continued.

“Moose go to water when they’re wounded, as this one did. He was bellowing in rage and pain, and he thrashed himself right out into the middle of the rapid where he got stuck in a beaver dam.”

Her voice seemed distant, as though she was reliving the moment in her mind. “He was in so much pain, and he couldn’t get free, and he was dying ... I grabbed a hank of rope and stripped down to go, I don’t know ... help him, while the bastard who shot him stood there, smirking, as if seeing me in my underwear was exactly the humiliation he’d been hoping for.”

Dallas ground the words out. “And then the moose drowned, and I was just *so angry*. I didn’t even feel the cold when I went in after him. You can’t leave a dead moose in the river because it’ll foul the water. I was furious and sobbing as I swam out to him, and the asshole client was *laughing*.”

I heard the tears in her voice and she swallowed thickly.

“The current was really strong, and I finally began to feel the cold ...” She gasped with the memory. “And I heard a voice say, as clear as day, *If you do this, you will die.*”

I could feel the pounding of her heart, and I wanted to gather her into my arms.

“I’d never heard voices before, and haven’t heard one since, but I listened that day. I left the moose where it was, trapped in the beaver dam, and I swam back to shore. The client was screaming at me to go get his rack, and I threw the rope at him and told him to get it himself. Then I picked up my clothes, got on my horse, and rode away.”

I held very still and concentrated on the matching my breath to hers until I felt the fury in both of us begin to fade. She watched the fire in silence for a long time before she spoke again.

“There were northern lights that night, and I felt like it was the universe marking a turning point. Like nature was saying ‘pay attention, don’t forget this moment. It matters.’ And when I got back to base camp, I knew what I had to do. I sent another guide out to find the client, and I never guided another hunt again.”

She exhaled deeply, and the tension seemed to ease out of her body with the breath.

“The moose out there today knew we were close—we’d just been talking and chopping wood—but it didn’t charge us.”

My fingers played idly with her hair. “Do you need the moose to forgive you for its brother?”

She went still. “No,” she finally said, “but I think it’s time to forgive myself.”

“For what?” I asked.

She turned inward again. I could hear it in her voice. “We have complex Indigenous harvest rights that my parents’ and grandparents’ generations fought hard for. I knew the outfitters used my

First Nations hunting privilege as a selling point to clients. I never stopped them because I figured the shots were mine to take or not. But that client felt *entitled* to my rights, as if he'd bought me, so my hunting privilege was his too."

She shuddered. "I worked for them for five years, telling myself I was doing a job and it didn't mean anything ..."

Her voice trailed off, and I kept mine quiet enough that she could let it go unheard if she wanted to. "What did you make it mean?"

She didn't say anything for a few minutes, and then she did. "I took my Northern Tutchone heritage for granted because it was who my grandfather was. And even though he had moved away from his family, they taught him the survival skills he taught me, so being his granddaughter connected me to his ... *my* First Nations heritage. Working for the outfitter, allowing him to exploit something I valued about myself, made me complicit. I betrayed myself by staying, and worse, I betrayed my grandfather and the significance of everything he taught me." She inhaled deeply. "I wasn't worthy of my heritage if I could sell it out so cheaply, so I left, everything. And yeah, I come back to visit every summer, but I haven't really come *back* ... until now."

She looked up and met my eyes, searching them as though to understand her own words. And then she looked past me out the cabin window, and a smile slowly lit her face. There were green and gold lights reflecting in her eyes, and I followed her gaze to see the northern lights dancing across the horizon.

"What do you think the universe is saying this time?" I asked quietly, watching the play of light on her skin. She breathed deeply, and then nestled her head against my chest as she watched the lights.

"Welcome home," she whispered to herself.