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THE
HUNTER

Tana French

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For David, who now has to be nice to me forever

ONE

Trey comes over the mountain carrying a broken chair. She carries it on her back, with the legs sticking out round her waist and held over her shoulders. The sky is a blue so hot it looks glazed, and the sun is burning the back of Trey's neck. Even the faint pin-sharp calls of birds, too high up to be seen, vibrate with heat. The woman who owns the chair offered Trey a lift back with it, but Trey has no inclination to let the woman into her business, and neither the inclination nor the ability to make conversation for the length of a car journey over the potholed mountain roads.

Her dog Banjo lollops in wide circles off the path, snuffing and burrowing among the thick heather, which is too brown-edged and heavily scented for July. It makes crisp rattling sounds as he pushes through it. Every few minutes he comes bounding back to tell Trey, with small happy puffs and moans, what he's found. Banjo is a mutt, black and tan, with a beagle's head and body set on the legs of something stubbier, and he's a lot more talkative than Trey is. He got his name from a banjo-shaped patch of white on his belly. Trey wanted something better for him, but her mind doesn't run easily to fancy things, and everything she came up with sounded like what some tosser out of a schoolbook would call a dog. In the end she left it at Banjo. Cal Hooper, the American who lives down near the village, has Banjo's litter-mate and named him Rip, and if a plain name is good enough for Cal's dog, it's good enough for Trey's. Besides, she spends

much of her waking time at Cal's place, meaning the two dogs spend much of their time together, and it would sound stupid if they didn't match.

Cal's place is where Trey is taking the chair, later on. Cal and Trey mend furniture for people, or make it, and they buy old wrecked furniture and fix it up to sell at the Saturday market in Kilcarrow town. One time they picked up a side table that to Trey looked useless, too little and spindly to hold anything worthwhile, but when Cal went on the internet it turned out to be almost two hundred years old. When they got through with it, they sold it for a hundred and eighty quid. The chair Trey is carrying has two stretchers and one leg in splinters, like someone gave it the kind of kicking that takes time and dedication, but once she and Cal get done with it, no one will be able to tell it was ever broken.

She's going home first, for lunch, because she wants to eat dinner at Cal's—Trey is growing fast enough, this summer, that she marks out her days mainly in terms of food—and her pride shies from turning up on his doorstep looking for two meals in the one day. She watches her boundaries extra hard because, if she had her wish, she'd live there. Cal's place has peace. As far up the mountain as Trey's house is, and as far from any other, it ought to be peaceful enough, but it crowds her. Her oldest brother and sister are gone, but Liam and Alanna are six and five and are mostly yelling for one reason or another, and Maeve is eleven and is mostly complaining and slamming the door of the room she shares with Trey. Even when they accidentally go a few minutes without making a racket, the buzz of them is always there. Their mam is silent, but it's not a silence with peace in it. It takes up space, like some heavy thing made of rusted iron built around her. Lena Dunne, who lives down below the mountains and who gave Trey the dog, says her mam used to be a talker, and a laugher too. Trey doesn't disbelieve her, exactly, but she finds the image inaccessible.

Banjo explodes out of the heather, delighted with himself, carrying something that Trey can smell coming a mile off. "Drop it," she orders. Banjo gives her a reproachful look, but he's well trained; he drops the thing, which hits the path with a sodden flop. It's narrow and dark, a young stoat maybe. "Good dog," Trey says, taking a hand off the chair to rub his head,

but Banjo isn't mollified. Instead of galloping off again, he trudges along beside her, drooping at both ends, to show her his feelings are hurt. Cal calls Banjo a big old baby. Rip is the kind of scrapper who could get a leg chopped off and keep on coming, but Banjo likes people to appreciate his suffering.

The downward slope gets steep in places, but Trey's legs are accustomed to this mountain, and she keeps her stride. Her runners raise small spurts of dust. She lifts her elbows to let the air dry her armpits, but there's not enough breeze to make a difference. Below her, the fields sprawl out, a mosaic of varying greens in odd-angled shapes that Trey knows as well as the cracks on her bedroom ceiling. The haymaking is underway: tiny baling machines trundle back and forth, deftly tracking the unexplained curves of the stone walls and leaving yellow cylinders in their wake like droppings. The lambs are white scraps skittering across the grass.

She cuts off the path, over a drystone wall tumbledown enough that she doesn't have to help Banjo clamber it, across an expanse of thigh-high gnarled weeds that used to be a field once, and into a thick band of spruce trees. The branches sift and scramble the sunlight into a confusing dazzle, and their shade cools her neck. Above her small birds are drunk on summer, zipping back and forth, all trying to be the loudest. Trey whistles a trill up at them and grins when they freeze into silence, trying to figure her out.

She comes out of the trees to the cleared ground behind her house. The house got a fresh coat of butter-colored paint and some patches to the roof a couple of years back, but nothing can paper over its air of exhaustion. Its spine sags, and the lines of the window frames splay off-kilter. The yard is weeds and dust, blurring into the mountainside at the edges, scattered with things Liam and Alanna were using for toys. Trey has brought each of her school friends here once, to show she's not ashamed of it, and hasn't asked them again. Her default position is to keep things separate. It's made easy by the fact that none of her friends come from this townland anyway. Trey doesn't hang around with people from Ardnakelty.

As soon as she steps inside the kitchen door, she knows the house is different. The air is taut and focused, with no scattering of movement and

noise. Before she has time to do more than register that fact and the smell of cigarette smoke, she hears, from the sitting room, her father's laugh.

Banjo lets out a preliminary huff of a bark. "No," Trey says, low and fast. He shakes off heather and dirt, his ears flapping, and lunges for his water bowl.

Trey stands still for a minute, in the wide band of sunlight falling through the door onto the worn linoleum. Then she goes into the hall, moving quietly, and stops outside the sitting room. Her father's voice runs clear and merry, tossing out questions that get back an excited babble from Maeve or a mumble from Liam.

Trey thinks about leaving, but she wants to see him, to know for sure. She pushes open the door.

Her dad is sitting smack in the middle of the sofa, leaning back and grinning, with his arms spread wide around Alanna and Maeve. They're grinning too, but uncertainly, like they just got a great big Christmas present that they might not want. Liam is squashed into a corner of the sofa, staring at their dad with his mouth open. Their mam is sitting on the edge of an armchair, with her back straight and her hands flat on her thighs. Even though she's been there all along and their dad hasn't been there in four years, Sheila is the one who looks like she can't feel at home in the room.

"Well, God almighty," Johnny Reddy says, his eyes twinkling at Trey. "Would you look at that. Little Theresa's after growing up. What age are you now? Sixteen? Seventeen?"

Trey says, "Fifteen." She knows that, if anything, she looks younger.

Johnny shakes his head, marveling. "I'll be beating the young lads away from the door with a stick before I know it. Or am I too late? Have you got yourself a fella already? Or two or three?" Maeve giggles sharply, and looks up at his face to check if that's right.

"Nah," Trey says flatly, when it becomes clear he's waiting for an answer.

Johnny lets out a sigh of relief. "I've time to find myself a good stick, so." He tilts his chin at the chair, which Trey has forgotten to put down. "What's that? Didja bring me a present?"

“Gonna mend it,” Trey says.

“She makes money at it,” Sheila says. Her voice is clearer than usual, and there are high spots of color on her cheekbones. Trey can’t tell whether she’s glad or angry about him being back. “That’s what bought the new microwave.”

Johnny laughs. “A chip off the old block, hah? Always got a bitta something on the go. That’s my girl.” He winks at Trey. Maeve wriggles under his arm, to remind him she’s there.

Trey remembered him big, but he’s only a middling-sized man, and slight with it. His hair, which is the exact same mousy brown as hers, flops across his forehead like a teenager’s. His jeans and his white T-shirt and his black leather jacket are the newest things in the house. The sitting room looks even messier around him.

She says, to her mam, “Taking this to Cal’s.” She turns around and goes out to the kitchen.

Behind her she hears Johnny say, with a laugh in his voice, “Cal, is it? Is that one of Senan Maguire’s young lads?”

Banjo is still at his water bowl, lapping noisily, but when Trey comes in he bounces up, wagging his whole rear end and looking hopefully at his food bowl. “Nah,” Trey tells him. She puts her face under the tap and rubs at it, stripping off sweat and dust. She rinses her mouth and spits hard into the sink. Then she cups her hand again and drinks for a long time.

She turns quick when she hears a sound behind her, but it’s Alanna, holding her limp stuffed rabbit under one armpit and swinging the door back and forth with the other hand. “Daddy came home,” she says, like it’s a question.

Trey says, “Yeah.”

“He says to come on back inside.”

“Going out,” Trey says. She rummages in the fridge, finds ham slices, and shoves a thick wad of them between two slices of bread. She wraps the sandwich in kitchen roll and crams it into the back pocket of her jeans. Alanna, still swinging the door, watches her as she hoists the chair onto her back, snaps her fingers for Banjo, and heads into the expanse of sunlight.

Cal is ironing his shirts on the kitchen table and considering shaving his beard off. When he grew it, back in Chicago, his idea of Irish weather was based on tourist websites, which were heavy on lush green fields and happy people in knit sweaters. For his first two years here, the climate lived up to the advertising, more or less. This summer appears to have snuck in from an entirely different website, maybe one about Spain. The heat has a brazen, unbudging quality that Cal, who has become accustomed to any given day containing a few scraps of sunshine, numerous degrees of cloud, and several varieties of rain, finds slightly unsettling. It's at odds with the landscape, whose beauty is founded on subtlety and flux, and it's pissing off the farmers: it's messed up their schedule for silage and hay, it's making the sheep irritable, and it's threatening the grazing. Among the guys in the pub, it's become the main topic of conversation, pushing aside the upcoming National Sheep Dog Trials, the woman Itchy O'Connor's eldest brought in from Dublin to marry, and the probable bribery involved in the construction of the new leisure center up in town. One of its minor inconveniences is that Cal's beard has turned into a heat trap. Whenever he goes outside, the lower half of his face feels like it has its own tropical climate.

Cal is fond of the beard, though. It was originally connected, in a hazy way, with his early retirement: he had had enough of being a cop, and of looking like a cop. In terms of the people round Ardnakelty, the beard turned out to be pointless—they had him pegged before he even got unpacked. To him, though, it means something.

Even in the heat, his house is cool. It's an undersized 1930s cottage with nothing noteworthy about it, but the walls are thick and solid, built to do their job. When Cal bought it, it was on the verge of falling apart, but he's brought it back, taking his time, since he doesn't have much else that needs doing. The room he's in, which is mainly living room and a little bit kitchen, has reached the point where it no longer feels like a project; it's turned into simply a good place to be. He's painted it white, with the east wall pale yellow-gold—Trey's idea—to match the sunset light that hits it.

Along the way he's acquired furniture, to expand on the previous owners' leftovers: he now has three chairs around the kitchen table, an old desk where Trey does her homework, an armchair, a faded blue sofa that could use reupholstering, and even a standing lamp. He's also acquired a dog. In his corner beside the fireplace, Rip is being thorough with a rawhide bone. Rip is small, floppy-eared, and built like a brick shithouse. He's half beagle, with a beagle's sweet face and a beagle's haphazard patches of black and tan and white, but Cal hasn't worked out the other half. He suspects wolverine.

Through the open window comes the exuberant riot of birds, who, unlike the sheep, are glorying in the heat and the abundance of bugs it's brought them. The breeze flows in soft and sweet as cream. A bumblebee blunders in with it and bumps itself against cupboards. Cal gives it a little time to think, and eventually it figures out the window and swerves off into the sunlight.

Outside the back door, there's a scuffle and a burst of happy barking. Rip shoots out of his corner and hurls himself down the hall to plaster his nose against the door firmly enough that Cal won't be able to open it. This happens every time Trey and Banjo arrive, but Rip, who is a sociable creature, gets too overexcited to remember.

"Back," Cal orders, nudging Rip out of the way with his toe. Rip manages to restrain himself, quivering, long enough that Cal can get the door open. Two young rooks rocket up off the step and head for their oak tree at the bottom of the garden, laughing so hard they tumble in the air.

Rip streaks after them, vowing to tear them apart. "Well, sonofabitch," Cal says, amused. He's been trying to build up a relationship with his colony of rooks ever since he arrived. It's working, but the relationship isn't exactly what he had in mind. He had some Disney idea of them bringing him presents and eating out of his hand. The rooks definitely feel he's an asset to the neighborhood, but mainly because he leaves them leftovers and because they like fucking with him. When they get bored, they yell down his chimney, drop rocks into his fireplace, or bang on his windows. The barking is new.

Almost at the tree, Rip does a 180 and tears off around the house towards the road. Cal knows what that means. He heads back into the house, to unplug the iron.

Trey comes in the door alone: Rip and Banjo are playing tag around the yard, or hassling the rooks, or rooting out whatever they can find in the hedges. The dogs know the boundaries of Cal's land, which is ten acres, more than enough to keep them occupied. They're not going to go chasing sheep and getting themselves shot.

"Went and got this," Trey says, swinging the chair off her back. "Your woman over the mountain."

"Good job," Cal says. "You need lunch?"

"Nah. Had it."

Having grown up dirt-poor himself, Cal understands Trey's prickly relationship with offers. "Cookies in the jar, if you need to top up," he says. Trey heads for the cupboard.

Cal puts his last shirt on a hanger and leaves the iron on the kitchen counter to cool off. "Thinking of getting rid of this," he says, giving his beard a tug. "What do you figure?"

Trey stops with a cookie in her hand and gives him a stare like he suggested walking naked down what passes for the main street in Ardnakelty. "Nah," she says, with finality.

The look on her face makes Cal grin. "Nah? Why not?"

"You'd look stupid."

"Thanks, kid."

Trey shrugs. Cal is well versed in the full range of Trey's shrugs. This one means that, having said her piece, she no longer considers this her problem. She shoves the rest of her cookie in her mouth and takes the chair into the smaller bedroom, which has turned into their workshop.

The kid's conversational skills being what they are, Cal relies on the timing and quality of her silences to communicate anything he ought to know. Normally she wouldn't have dropped the subject that fast, not without giving him more shit about what he would look like clean-shaven. Something is on her mind.

He puts his shirts in his bedroom and joins Trey in the workshop. It's small and sunny, painted with the leftovers from the rest of the house, and it smells of sawdust, varnish, and beeswax. Clutter is everywhere, but it's ordered. When Cal realized they were getting serious about carpentry, he and Trey built a sturdy shelving unit for boxes of nails, dowels, screws, rags, pencils, clamps, waxes, wood stains, wood oils, drawer knobs, and everything else. Pegboards on the walls hold rows of tools, each one with its shape traced in its proper place. Cal started off with his granddaddy's toolbox and has since accumulated just about every carpentry tool in existence, and a few that don't officially exist but that he and Trey have improvised to suit their needs. There's a worktable, a lathe bench, and a stack of mixed scrap wood in a corner for repairs. In another corner is a dilapidated cartwheel that Trey found somewhere, which they're keeping on the grounds that you never know.

Trey is kicking a drop cloth into place on the floor, to stand the chair on. The chair has good bones. It was handmade, long enough ago to have a dip worn into the seat by many rear ends, and another worn into the front stretcher by many feet. The back and the legs are delicate turned spindles, ringed and beaded here and there for decoration. It's spent much of its life near cooking or burning, though: smoke, grease, and layers of polish have left it covered in a dark, tacky film.

"Nice chair," Cal says. "Gonna have to clean it up before we do anything else."

"I told her that. She said good. Her granddad made it."

Cal tilts the chair to inspect the damage. "On the phone she said the cat knocked it over."

Trey makes a skeptical *pfft* noise. "Yeah," Cal says.

"Her Jayden's in my school," Trey tells him. "He's a prick. Hits little kids."

"Who knows," Cal says. "All these are gonna need replacing. What wood do you figure?"

Trey examines the seat, which all those rear ends have kept clean enough to show the grain, and the insides of the breaks. "Oak. White."

“Yeah, me too. See if we’ve got a piece thick enough to turn. Don’t worry about matching the color; we’re gonna have to stain it anyway. Just get the grain as close as you can.”

Trey squats by the assortment of scrap wood and starts poking around. Cal goes out to the kitchen and mixes white vinegar and warm water in an old jug. Then he dusts off the chair with a soft cloth, leaving space for the kid to talk into if she feels like it, and watches her.

She’s grown. Two years ago, when she first showed up in his backyard, she was a scrawny, silent kid with a self-inflicted buzz cut and a half-grown bobcat’s urge towards both flight and fight. Now she’s up past his shoulder, the buzz cut has relaxed into a rough crop, her features are getting a new clarity, and she rummages and sprawls around his house like she lives there. She even has entire conversations, or at least most days she does. She’s got none of the polish and artifice that some teenagers start developing, but she’s a teenager all the same, both her mind and her life getting more intricate every day. The things she says, just about school and her friends and whatever, have new layers underneath them. Cal is having more trouble with it than she seems to be. These days, every time he picks up a whiff of something on her mind, the bloom of terror inside him spreads wider and darker. Too many things can happen, at fifteen, and do too much damage. Trey seems solid as hardwood, in her own way, but she’s taken too many knocks in her life not to have cracks in there somewhere.

Cal finds a clean rag and starts rubbing down the chair with the vinegar mix. The sticky coating comes away well, leaving long brown streaks on the rag. Outside the window, blackbirds’ rambling songs carry from far across the fields, and bees revel in the clover that’s commandeered Cal’s backyard. The dogs have found a stick to play tug-of-war with.

Trey, holding two pieces of wood side by side to compare them, says, “My dad came home.”

Everything in Cal comes to a dead stop. Of all the fears that were milling inside him, this wasn’t one.

He says, after what seems to be a long time, “When?” The question is a dumb one, but it’s all that comes into his head.

“This morning. While I was getting the chair.”

“Right,” Cal says. “Well. He here for good? Or just for a while?”

Trey shrugs extravagantly: no idea.

Cal wishes he could see her face. He says, “How’re you feeling about it?”

Trey says flatly, “He can fuck off.”

“OK,” Cal says. “That’s fair.” Maybe he ought to be giving the kid some bullshit speech that includes the words “but he’s your daddy,” but Cal makes it his practice never to bullshit Trey, and his feelings on Johnny Reddy happen to coincide with hers.

Trey says, “Can I stay here tonight?”

Cal’s mind stops again. He goes back to rubbing down the chair, keeping his rhythm even. After a moment he says, “You worried about something your dad might do?”

Trey snorts. “Nah.”

She sounds like she’s telling the truth. Cal relaxes a little bit. “Then what?”

Trey says, “He can’t just walk back in.”

She has her back to Cal, rummaging among the wood, but her whole spine has a taut, angry hunch. “Right,” Cal says. “I’d probably feel the same way.”

“Can I stay, so?”

“No,” Cal says. “Not a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Well,” Cal says. “Your dad might not be happy about you taking off the minute he’s back in town. And I figure I’d best not start out by pissing him off. If he’s gonna stick around, I’d rather he didn’t have a problem with you hanging out over here.” He leaves it at that. She’s old enough to understand some, at least, of the other reasons why not. “I’ll call Miss Lena, see if you can spend the night there.”

The kid starts to argue, but she changes her mind and rolls her eyes instead. Cal finds, to his surprise, that he feels shaken, like he just fell off

something high and he needs to sit down. He props his ass on the worktable and pulls out his phone.

On reflection, he texts Lena rather than calling her. *Could Trey stay at your place tonight? Don't know if you heard but her dad just came home. She doesn't feel like hanging out with him.*

He sits still, watching the sunlight shift across Trey's thin shoulders as she pulls out lengths of wood and discards them, until Lena texts back. *Fuck's sake. I don't blame her. Yeah she can stay no problem.*

Thanks, Cal texts. *I'll send her over after dinner.* "She says you're welcome to stay," he tells Trey, pocketing his phone. "You gotta tell your mama where you are, though. Or ask Miss Lena to."

Trey rolls her eyes harder. "Here," she says, thrusting an old oak sleeper at him. "This?"

"Yeah," Cal says. He goes back to the chair. "That's good."

Trey marks the end of the sleeper with a swipe of black Sharpie and puts it back in the corner. "That stuff coming off?" she asks.

"Yeah," Cal says. "It's fine. Easy as pie."

Trey finds a clean rag, dips it in the vinegar mix and wrings it out hard. She says, "What if he's not OK with me coming here?"

"You reckon he'll have a problem?"

Trey considers this. "He never gave a shite where we went before."

"Well then," Cal says. "Most likely he won't give a shit about this, either. If he does, we'll deal with it then."

Trey throws a quick glance up at him. Cal says, "We'll deal with it."

Trey nods, one decisive jerk, and starts in on the chair. The fact that his word can reassure her makes Cal want to sit down all over again.

Reassured or not, she's still not feeling talkative, even by her own standards. After a while, Rip and Banjo get thirsty and come in the open front door, take a long noisy drink from their bowls, and bounce into the workshop for some attention. Trey squats to make a fuss over them, even laughing when Rip nudges her under the chin hard enough that she falls on her backside. Then the dogs flop down for a rest in their corner, and Trey picks up her rag again and gets back to work.