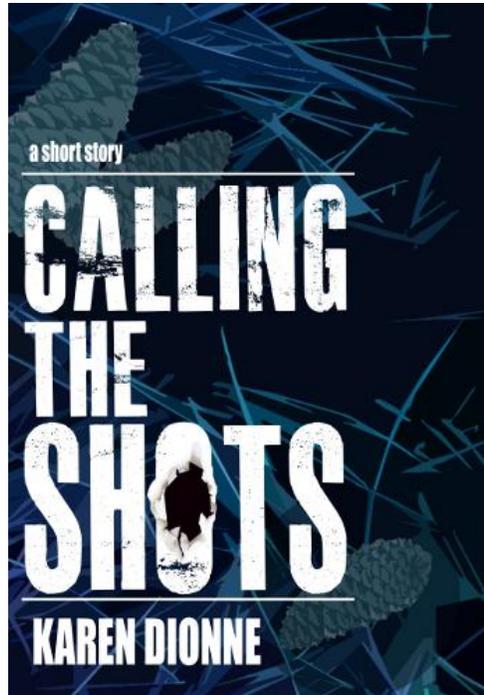


"A terrific tale, with the coldest ending line I've read since the last Richard Stark novel." -- [Little Big Crimes](#)

("Calling the Shots" first appeared in the anthology *FIRST THRILLS: High-Octane Stories* by the Hottest Thriller Authors ed. by Lee Child)

## Calling the Shots by Karen Dionne



He shouldn't be working in the woods alone. Jason knew better, running pole for his dad summers and weekends since he was ten; managing his own firewood business since he was thirteen. Jenny'd asked him not to come. Begged him, really. Claimed he'd promised to take her to the movies, though Jason couldn't remember any such thing. He suspected he was being played—it wouldn't be the first time Jenny manipulated him into doing what she wanted. Still, a movie about a woman who hooks the man of her dreams by cooking all of his favorite recipes wasn't such a bad idea when you thought about it.

He'd been about to give in, but then Jenny'd poked out her bottom lip like her mom always did when she didn't get her way and started blinking real fast, faking like she was going to cry, and he lost it. Told her he couldn't go through with it—not the movie, but the whole getting-married-before-the-baby-was-born thing—and bailed. Got in his truck, and she started crying for real.

Driving out, he felt bad at first. But then he got one of those out-of-body flash-forwards and saw Jenny twenty years from now, a clone of her mother: overweight, domineering, an unhappy woman whose only pleasure seemed to be making sure everyone else felt the same, and knew he'd done the right thing. Yeah, he shouldn't have gotten her pregnant in the first place;

he could admit his share of the blame. But adding to that mistake by making another was beyond stupid.

He stripped off his jacket and hung it over a bush. Reveled in the warmth and solitude of a sunny November Sunday, then started up the saw. Took out his frustrations on a skinny jack pine and smiled as the tree went down easily, branches snapping like toothpicks, the top landing exactly where Jason wanted it in the middle of the brush pile.

He eyed the stand of mixed beech and maple that bordered his strip. The serious money was in hardwoods, but he wasn't about to cut a single stick. Jenny's father marked out the strips the way a dog marked its territory, making sure Jason always got the worst wood, as if Jason needed reminding who was boss. Man couldn't wear the pants in his own family, so naturally, he took it out on him. Jason would've rather hired on with any other jobber, but woods work was suffering along with the rest of the country, and Olaf Anderson would do anything for his daughter, so here he was. Lucky him.

Until an hour ago, all Jason wanted was to earn enough to set him and Jenny up in an apartment before they broke the news about the baby, or maybe someone's empty cabin. No way could they live in his parents' basement. The Finns and the Swedes in Michigan's Upper Peninsula had hated each other for generations. Jason's parents hadn't even met Jenny. Said they didn't need to; all they needed to know was her last name. A saw that cut both ways, judging by the way Jenny's parents treated Jason. Anyone who thought Romeo and Juliet would've had an easier time in the twenty-first century had never met the Andersons and Niemis.

He bent to make another notch. A breeze kicked up, an early winter wind that swirled wood chips and sawdust in his face. He blinked—

—and came to with an elephant on his chest.

Not an elephant, a log—a big one. Nothing like the puny scrub he'd been cutting—a massive, long-dead maple—a widow-maker hung up for God knew how long in a nearby tree, just waiting for someone like him to come along.

He lay still and waited for his brain to come back to full power. The saw was running, so he couldn't have been out long. His hard hat was gone. No doubt it was the hard hat that saved him. They didn't call them widow-makers for nothing.

He pushed against the trunk with both hands, then twisted sideways and shoved with his shoulder, feeling like the beetles he used to pin inside a shoe box when he was little. The tree shifted. He shoved again, letting the trunk rock and settle. Each time it rolled back, it knocked the wind out of him like a sucker punch, but at last he built up enough momentum to carry it past the tipping point. The log rolled down his shins and over his ankles.

Breathing heavily, he sat up.

Bright, arterial blood spurted from his right leg like a fountain.

*Holy*—The saw must've caught him on the way down. He pressed down hard with both hands. Blood gushed between his fingers. Fumbling one-handed with his belt buckle, he stripped off the belt and cinched it around his leg up high near his groin. The bleeding slowed.

He sat back. Wiped his hands on his jeans. Tried not to panic. His cell was in his truck. The truck was a quarter, maybe half a mile away. Reception was always spotty, but if there was a God in heaven, the call would get through.

He grabbed one of the maple's broken-off limbs and used it as a cane to get to his feet. Blood ran down his leg. He shuddered. Wolves lived in the woods. Not many, but still. Bears and

coyotes, too. Normally, they didn't come around people, but this was about as far from normal as you could get.

He tried a step. It turned out more like a hop. He step-hopped, step-hopped, using the branch as a prop. *Hop on Pop*. Dr. Seuss played in his head as he got a feel for the cane and his feet found their rhythm. *We like—to hop—on top—of Pop*. Better than the Brothers Grimm.

Finally, the truck. He hobbled around to the passenger side and took his cell out of the glove box. No service. Okay then, he'd drive himself out. It wouldn't be easy without the use of his right leg, but he could do it. Eyeing the height of the 4 by 4's seat, he tried to figure out the best way to climb in.

*The keys*. The keys were in his jacket pocket. His jacket was out where he'd been cutting, hanging on a bush.

He sagged against the doorjamb. He couldn't walk all the way to his strip and back, he just couldn't. Even if he found the strength, it'd be full dark before he made it half way.

But he couldn't hunker down in the truck and wait for the crew to come along in the morning either. He could bleed out, freeze to death—Jenny might send someone looking for him when he didn't text her to say goodnight. Or not.

All he could do was suck it up. Be a man. *The kind of man a father wanted for his daughter*.

He straightened. Jenny was going to have a *baby*. He was going to be a father, whether they married or not. Maybe they were off to a bad start. Maybe Jenny would end up as shrewish as her mother. But there was no way he'd ever be as weak and indecisive as her father.

\* \* \*

Hours (Minutes? Days?) later, he sprawled at the bottom of a hill he hadn't known was there until he'd stumbled in the dark and rolled down it. He'd flailed wildly as he fell, grabbing at branches, grabbing at vegetation, grabbing at nothing, but nothing had stopped him from landing in a heap with his bad leg bent beneath him. The tourniquet was gone. Jason's hands were locked in its place, squeezing at what he hoped was the right pressure point with fingers that had long ago lost feeling.

*So cold*. He shivered. How much blood could you lose before you were done for? He pushed away the thought and focused on the shush of the wind as he fought to stay conscious, letting the sound carry him back to when he used to work with his dad in the woods when he was little; laying the measuring pole alongside the downed trees so his dad could cut the logs to length, stepping in and around the brush struggling to keep up, listening to the trees crack from the cold and the chickadees whistle.

A chickadee called. A single high, shrill note.

No. Not a chickadee. What?

Another whistle. A voice calling his name.

Then crunching leaves. Footsteps. A light in his face.

"You found me," he whispered.

"Wasn't me. Jenny asked me to come. Told me you were out here."

A pause. "She told me."

Emphasis on the "told me." Not much. Enough.

"I thought—I was afraid—" Jason swallowed. "I was afraid you'd be too late."

Jenny's mother stuck the flashlight under her arm, took a pack of cigarettes from her purse, and sat down heavily on a stump.

"Not too late." She lit a cigarette and took a long, slow puff. "I'm too early."