

BLOOD TRAIL

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They stood at the edge of the forest, where it opened onto a strip of prairie grass. Just beyond the grass was a terraced cornfield, working its way upward to a gravel road about a quarter mile away.

The snow had started around noon. Wet, heavy flakes. Eli raised his shotgun and brought the butt firmly against his shoulder. He rested his cheek against the walnut stock and looked into the scope. "I can't make out any snowflakes," he said, lowering and raising his gun, trying to locate the flakes, first against the sky, and then the trees. "I can't dial in."

"You obviously need some work with that scope," his dad said. "The way you botched that shot."

It had been a long shot, around a hundred yards, and the only reason he'd taken it was because his dad could see the deer. Had he missed, Eli would not have cared, and they wouldn't be in the position of having to track a wounded animal.

The deer was, according to his dad, "a big mama doe, with tons of good meat on her." She'd walked the edge of the tree line before stopping, turning broadside, and then walking toward the cornfield. Two smaller deer had lagged behind. He wouldn't have had a closer shot so, sitting against a tree, he had rested the slug-gun on his knee, drawn in a deep breath, found the crosshairs in his scope, and set his sight on the deer's front quarters—heart and lung area. He followed the deer with the crosshairs: a fat, old deer, whose coat had turned a thick, rough winter brown. He'd let half his breath out, relaxed his arms, and squeezed the trigger. Just as his father

had taught him while using a pellet gun. He couldn't shoot without hearing his dad's words: "Squeeze the trigger. Don't pull, squeeze."

Blood had gushed at the initial area of contact. "Dark blood," his dad said. "Probably a brisket shot." His dad looked at him. "Not good for tracking. Won't be a ton of blood."

Now they would have to wait, let the deer run and settle in, and then start tracking.

"General rule," his dad said, "is an hour."

"I don't think we need to wait that long," Eli said.

His dad shook his head. "You didn't get a good shot. She took off pretty hard after you fired. She'll need a while to stiffen up."

They stood there for another minute, looking around, the snow collecting on their blaze orange vests and stocking caps. "Let's sit for a while," his dad said. "See if another one strolls through."

It was early December, the temperature just below freezing. The sky, a soft gray. They sat on either side of an oak tree. Eli watched squirrels scurry around in the newly settled snow, gathering and gnawing on nuts. The trees, bare. Their uppermost branches knuckling together in the breeze, creaking.

After a while, Eli dozed off, his shotgun resting on his legs. He woke up to the turn of his dad's thermos cap. His dad poured a cup of coffee, his back still resting against the tree, still scanning for movement in the woods. "I'll take some if you have more," Eli whispered. The smell of the coffee created a longing for warmth and home. Eli had always liked the idea of hunting more than the hunting itself. The coffee served as a reminder of the lazy morning he'd wanted. He didn't want to be out here. And with every passing hour he had to remind himself that their hunting excursion happened one weekend a year.

Eli stood while his father poured another cup. "Now don't get too ambitious," his dad said. "We'll slow-hunt for a while, walk nice and easy, see if we can nab another deer."

"We'll be tracking on someone else's property," Eli said. "We're supposed to unload our guns if we do that."

"Don't be an asshole," his dad said. "You see any houses? No one'll notice."

"They'll hear us if you shoot."

"Or if *you* shoot."

"I'm not shooting," Eli said. "I already have a deer."

"You don't have shit," his dad said. "Your goddamn deer is wounded."

His dad handed him a cup of coffee.

"What about the snow?" Eli said, after a sip.

"What about it?" his dad said.

"It'll be tough to track."

"The blood will show through," his dad said. "And the snow won't collect as well in the woods. That deer's bedded in there somewhere."

At first the tracking was easy. The deer had been on a dead sprint before ducking into the woods and disappearing into a steep ravine. Eli and his dad walked up to the barbed wire fence. He realized, then, that he'd shot it on someone else's property. Why didn't he notice this at the time he shot? The distance must've thrown him off. If his dad noticed this, he didn't say anything.

They followed small drops of blood to the edge of the forest where the deer had disappeared, eraser-sized droplets every few feet. The woods on this property were dense. Mostly buckthorn and briar patches that caught against their Carhartt pants, sometimes going right through.

While Eli kept his shotgun slung over his shoulder, his dad kept his in ready position: left hand on the forestock, right hand on the handle, finger on the trigger. His dad's was a semi-automatic slug gun. Black composite with open sights. He didn't have a rifled barrel like Eli's, but what he lost in accuracy, he gained in the number of shots—five total.

Eli had bought his single-shot gun because the saleswoman owned the same one and he thought this might impress her. But when he went to ask her out after making the purchase, she hemmed and hawed, and said, it's not a good time. Still, Eli liked the distance and accuracy, and the scope. Up until today, all the deer he'd shot had dropped upon impact. "I get neck

shots," Eli had bragged to his friends. "They crumple and fold on the spot." And while this was sometimes true, he was never really proud of these confessions. It was just something he said while giving away venison neatly wrapped in white freezer paper, permanent marker scribbled on the outside to indicate the cut of meat. He could never eat the deer. Not after having shot it, and watching it writhe, its dying legs rustling up leaves or snow, its back buckling before the tongue goes limp, slipping out of its mouth. After that, Eli couldn't bear the thought of forking the flesh into his mouth.

Halfway down the ravine, five deer spooked and ran up the other side. Eli's dad shot three times. The report left Eli's ears ringing. "Fuck," his dad said. "I didn't see them 'til it was too late. Too far of a shot."

Tracking another deer, especially this far from the truck, would only have complicated their situation, so he was glad his father had missed. The two kept walking down the slope, at an angle, occasionally holding onto saplings to keep their balance.

It was completely still at the bottom of the ravine. Eli pointed to oval-shaped areas of leaves and twigs that had not been exposed to the snow. "Here's where they were bedding down."

"Do you still have the trail?" his dad said. "Any blood?"

"Barely," Eli said. "But she couldn't have gone much farther."

"They usually take the easiest path when they're injured" his dad said. "I'd be surprised if she ran back up the hill."

Down here there was less underbrush. There were more fallen trees, but this wasn't as bad as wading through thorn bushes. Eli trudged along next to his father who was still hunting, searching ahead, scanning for any movement. After about a half-mile, the blood had trickled to a small drop every ten feet or so.

His dad had been right. The deer hadn't moved uphill. She'd stayed on the bottom, bobbing and weaving her way through downed logs and brush. They paused for a minute while his dad tied his boot, then he reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a flask and a pack of Winstons. "Usually don't smoke or drink unless we're celebrating. But what the hell."

It would be getting dark soon and Eli wanted his dad to give up. Leave the deer. Come back and search in the morning. But even that idea wasn't

appealing. To hell with the deer.

But despite his father's hunting infringements—trespassing, loaded guns on someone else's land—his dad would not stop searching for the wounded animal. Eli accepted a pull from the flask.

"Bushmills," his dad said. "Damn good, huh?"

"Not bad."

They lit cigarettes. "We might not be giving it enough time to bed down and stiffen up," his dad said.

"It hasn't bedded down yet," Eli said. "We would've seen the spot."

"That's what I mean," his dad said.

"Maybe we should call it a day."

His father took another pull of whiskey. "And come back tomorrow?"

"I guess," Eli said.

"You guess?" his dad said. "I guess you don't want to help put food on the table. I guess someone else taught you how to hunt. You can't just give up." It was a comment his dad made every hunting season: "Putting food on the table." Eli knew it was all bullshit. They weren't starving. They were never starving. His dad just liked to hunt.

"Fine," Eli said. "Let's come back tomorrow."

"No," his dad said. "We're gonna keep going."

They pushed along, climbing over logs, backing their way through thorn bushes, and came to an area that was completely open. "I bet it's a food plot," his dad said. "Look there." He pointed to what looked like a tree house perched on long wooden poles supported with two-by-sixes hammered into an X. "Whoever built this deer-stand is pretty serious about their hunting." His dad reached to the ground and picked at brown plants. It was a mixture of beans, sorghum, corn, and alfalfa.

They moved away from the food plot, and came to a dry creek bed. As Eli stepped down into it his father raised his gun and fired a shot. And fired again.

"Shit," his dad said. "Fucking deer surprised me."

"You hit it?" Eli said.

"I don't know," his dad said. "It kept running."

Eli stomped up and out of the creek bed and started walking up the ravine. He wanted to show his frustration without getting into a yelling match, but halfway up the hill, he looked back to see about his dad and found him walking up the hill in the opposite direction. "Why the fuck did you take that shot?" Eli yelled. His voice echoed through the ravine. The volume surprised him.

"We're legal 'til a half-hour after sunset," his dad said.

"We're on someone else's property," Eli said. His dad didn't reply. Eli was about to start walking again but he thought he heard a faint noise. The wheeze of a small engine?

His dad kept walking.

"Dad," Eli said. "Do you hear that? I think there're four-wheelers up there. We need to climb out of here."

"They can come down here if they wanna talk," his dad said. "I'm tracking a deer."

"It's dark out," he said. "You're not tracking shit. And you just shot at a fucking deer on their property."

"That was your deer."

"You don't know that."

"They don't either," his dad said.

"You can explain that to whoever the hell is up there."

His dad walked up the hill, his shotgun flung over his shoulder, and he emerged from the woods and into a field where three men wearing camo jackets sat on four-wheelers. The men were focused on his father, not looking in his direction. Eli crouched behind a tree and took off his blaze-orange hat. One of the men, fully bearded, got off his four-wheeler and he started pointing at Eli's dad. His dad knew how to handle these situations. He'd been in the military: he could take orders; he could give orders.

His dad took off his hat and wiped his brow, never once looking over in Eli's direction. He could hear his dad say "my son" and "wounded deer" and "I'm really sorry." Pretty soon, after they'd talked for a bit more, he heard the men laughing.

The snow was coming, a bit faster now. It was dark but the snow

made it light enough to see.

His dad had rested his gun against an elm. He was standing tall, talking with his hands, explaining. When Eli thought the situation was under control, he came out from behind the tree. But instead of walking over to his dad's defense, he stood there for another minute, trying to figure out what he wanted to say.