

# THE HUNT

Gracie Larue

The late November morning was cold as frost-bitten pine trees gave off their thick, sweet scent. Burnt-colored foliage peaked its stems through the powdery snow, footprints forming along the familiar path. A grey sky enveloped by icy fog surrounded the father and son, a duo once made up of boy and man now formed by two men, walking proudly with shotguns slung behind their backs and cold breath visible in the frozen forest. Heavy, camouflaged coats failed to blend into the stark white of the Canadian winter, for even the deep green branches of dense pine were capped with lingering snow.

The old man trudged a few steps ahead of his son, pausing every now and then to listen to the echoing calls of the mallards, stoic in his focus. The business man passed his father on the trail when he stopped, overlapping imprints of rabbit feet and knowingly interrupting the old man's concentration, for he knew that, like the weather, his father was cold.

Newly retired, the aging man had betrayed his hunting companion, whether he realized it or not. Only a few days before the annual Canadian expedition, he had turned over his oil company to his eldest son, not the man who walked with him now. Resentful at the idea that his father entrusted his treasure with the son who was not nearly as smart or clever, inexperienced and unworthy to be gifted such responsibility, the young man pushed back icy branches, slinging snow onto the old man's wrinkled face and refusing to acknowledge his father, who struggled to match his son's pace.

"We need to turn around," he ordered from behind, coughing deeply. "And take a left at that log. You hear me, Fred? Let me lead. You don't know the path like I do."

But the younger man did not listen. He readjusted his slumping backpack and pushed through the snow with his thick, rubber boots, looking forward, his face solemn yet almost pulsing with anger. He knew he led them in the wrong direction, but felt tired of abiding by his father's word. Becoming a man, he thought, would suffice to earn his father's respect, yet he never felt so wronged as he did now.

The young man no longer attempted to sympathize with his dispassionate parent. No nostalgic memories of father-son bonding came to mind, no matter how deep the son delved into his recollections of childhood. Since he could remember, money was never spare and always coveted. Enough was never enough for the wealthy businessman father, and while maids and chefs and chauffeurs made for a lavish lifestyle, the emptiness that accompanied a father's absence deemed unbearable at times. Tired of getting his hopes up, the young man learned to expect no solace from his supposed guardian. Even when the invitations arose for the annual hunting expeditions, he knew the trips were arranged by his mother, and the last thing his father wanted was a young boy tailing along on what he considered to be a time of self-reflection.

The old man's breathing grew heavy as he covertly struggled to match pace with the son, but he managed to compose his broad stature and heaving chest. The young man had learned to never expect emotion from his father, even now as he ignored the old man's directions. Despite his good intentions, the father was selfish, and the only emotion he ever portrayed occurred when a glass of syrupy liquor rested in his palm, numbed from gripping pens to sign papers all of his life.

The image of the older brother's hand signing those papers chilled the young man, who grew colder when the temperature was already so low. He was proud to have never relied on a drink for good spirits, but he, too, had his flaws: flaws built upon his father's cold shoulder. The old man no longer protested as the tense pair delved deeper into the wintry forest, nearing the calls of the ill-fated mallards. A small animal scuffled behind a wilting bush and the grey sky began to bloom, tints of light blue melting into the morning fog. The passion for duck-hunting that the father and son shared was the only binding between them now, the last string tying the relationship together. The longer path chosen by the young man caused deep breaths to emerge from his father, and he knew the old man must feel embarrassed as weakness peaked through his stoic build. The icy steam rising from the sought-for pond grew visible through the mint-scented branches which grew sparse as the clearing neared.

A fine bit ahead of his father, the young man paused, noticing a gridded fence standing in the softening snow, an obstacle caused by his poorly-planned trail. He would not turn around and walk the traditional path, for that would substantiate the intemperance of his actions. Not too terribly tall, the fence would be climbed.

The old man finally caught up to the stubborn son, seeing the barrier which rose before them.

"No," he said through fast-paced breathing. "I can't."

The son felt the humiliation which crept upon his father—the humiliation he had felt when his loyalty was exchanged for nothing. Deciding to go first so he could assist his father from the other side, he took the old man's shotgun to alleviate some weight from the his climb. Ignoring his father's protest, he scaled the slippery fence, gun slung on each shoulder. The weight of the backpack and weaponry oddly shifted his balance, making the climb more difficult than he had initially presumed. As he pulled his left foot up to tuck into a metallic hole before he repositioned his weight, the heavy, rubber sole of his boot skimmed the metal, causing the shotgun slung around his left shoulder to slide over the thick, camouflaged fabric. Trying to catch the gun before it fell to the wintry ground, the young man grasped onto the grid with his left hand and summarily reached over with his right. Grabbing the gun which pointed downwards at the forest floor, his numbed pointer finger skimmed the dark brown trigger. The deafening sound of the release caused him to lose his grip and his body fell, imprinting itself in the sheet of bone-chilling snow. Recovering his breath as he looked up at the aging sky, he glanced to his left to retrieve the fallen gun, but noticed an unnerving coloring against the stark white.

The young man stifled a gasp as red dotted the snow, the harsh liquid expanding into the solidified water. The son's gaze followed the coloring's trail, a river whose delta was the gaping mouth of his father, blood pooling into the cracks of his light-pink, chapped lips. The son, realizing what he had done, quickly crawled over to his father's fallen body, staring into the old man's eyes whose flushed lids fluttered, melting snow dotting his eyelashes.

"Ike," the son muttered, for he had not called his father "Dad" in years.

His shock dissipated into fear as he shook his father's limp arm. "Ike, keep breathing." Even now, he did not cry in front of his father.

"Keep breathing, Ike! Don't stop breathing."

His tone quickened and hardened too much for his liking. He hated his insensitivity. The old man lay quietly, staring deep into the eyes of his son. His breathing began to still, and the son's quivering hands which rested on his father's wrist felt the pulse slow.

The sky was a pastel blue, now. Light wind caused the dense, green branches to rustle against one another, a hush falling over the forest. The ducks nearby, resting upon the stilled waters of the silver pond, sung their familiar song. The words, "I'm sorry," quivered in the chilled air, rising among thick trunks and echoing past the swaying tips of towering pine, mingling with the mallards, until the pleading phrase was indecipherable from their cry.