

## The Hunter

Ryan was cold. His toes burned despite the heavy boots and thermal socks he was wearing. His shoulders ached from hunching against the cold. His fingers felt like someone was sticking needles into them, and he was beginning to shiver uncontrollably. He'd enjoyed winter activities in the past, but he'd never before crouched motionless in a deer blind until his whole body ached.

Ryan had grown up listening to his father tell hunting stories with his friends. It sounded like a wonderful adventure. He was thrilled when his parents gave him a used deer rifle for Christmas. He and his father spent many hours on the range that summer, sighting it in and refining his marksmanship. He was proud of how accurate his shooting was. And he had eagerly helped his father plan this trip during the preceding week, looking forward to his first hunt.

Excitement and anticipation kept him warm as they trudged through the snow in the pre-dawn darkness, his father expertly leading the way through the woods to the blind they had set up at the edge of a clearing. They chewed venison jerky along the way, having skipped breakfast to get an early start. They were safely hidden in the blind by the time the sun rose, sending fingers of weak winter light through the trees and into the clearing. That seemed like hours ago. Since then they had crouched in the cold, not making a sound, and not seeing a sign of a deer.

Ryan ceased to pay any attention to the clearing. His focus was on how miserable he felt, and the more he concentrated the worse he felt. He was ready to go home. A nudge from his father brought him back to his senses. Noiselessly his father pointed to a dark area in the woods.

Ryan eased the rifle up to his shoulder and peered through the scope. It took him a moment to find the dark area. At first he didn't see anything but trees, but then a slight motion caught his attention. Something was moving behind the bushes at the edge of the clearing. He kept his focus on the bushes, and he was soon able to discern the outline of a deer. Not the entire deer, but he could see the back and hindquarters through the thin branches at the top of the bushes. The head and shoulders were hidden by a small cluster of trees.

The deer stepped forward and Ryan could see its head. It was a buck, with an impressive set of antlers. A few more steps and he could see the entire animal. It was a magnificent sight. It raised its head, seemingly with pride, but Ryan knew it was searching for predators, peering into the woods to make certain it was safe before advancing to the low bushes which grew along the now frozen creek. Ryan had a clear shot. He centered his scope on the region of the buck's heart, the area that was marked by a bulls-eye on the targets he and his father had practiced with last summer. He just had to ease the trigger back and the buck would collapse on the snow.

Ryan knew from his father's stories that no matter how well placed, the first shot doesn't always kill the deer. It would collapse in shock, confused and frightened. It might struggle to get up, or it might just lie there. Ryan wondered if it would be cold, lying in the snow. He would have to shoot it a second time to "put it out of its misery," as his father described it. But he would be the reason it was in misery to begin with. Could he put a second bullet into an animal that was lying helpless on the ground?

It struck Ryan that he had the power to destroy this beautiful creature, but he didn't have the power to restore it. Once he fired, he would have to follow through until it was destroyed. But worrying about this was ridiculous. Shooting a deer was why they were out here in the first place. He had looked forward to this day for months. He wanted to be able to sit around with his father and friends and tell his own hunting story. His father had bought him the rifle taught him to shoot, and gotten up before dawn to give him this opportunity. And now he could sense that his father was getting anxious, wondering why it was taking him so long to fire.

"CRACK!" The rifle shoved back into his shoulder as a puff of snow erupted in front of the buck. The deer bounded into the woods and was gone in an instant.

His father looked surprised for a moment, and then turned to him with a smile. "Buck fever," he said. "Don't worry, it happens to all of us sometimes. You get excited when you first see a deer and you jerk the trigger. We just need to wait, and another deer will come along sooner or later."

"No Dad," Ryan said. "I, I missed that deer on purpose. I just couldn't bring myself to kill it."

Ryan's father looked hurt, and Ryan felt cold and miserable. "Can we go home now?" he asked.

They trudged back to the car in silence. Ryan's dad stared straight ahead as he drove home, never saying a word.

"I don't think hunting is bad," Ryan tried to explain as they were driving home. "I know it helps keep the deer population in check. There aren't enough natural predators, so if people didn't hunt the deer would starve during the winter. And I like to eat venison. I know you and your friends really like to hunt, and I thought I'd like it too. But I guess it's just not for me."

Ryan's father never said a word. He just stared at the road, and seemed to be deep in thought. Ryan sat beside him, overcome with shame. He had disappointed his father. Why couldn't he have just shot the deer when he had a chance? It would have been over in a few seconds, and his dad would have been proud of him. His dad could have bragged to his friends about the buck his son shot when they went hunting together. Instead, the opportunity was gone forever.

They pulled into their driveway. Dejectedly, Ryan started to open the car door to get out. He felt his father's hand on his shoulder, so he turned to see what was the matter. His father was looking him straight in the eye.

"Son, when you told me you missed that deer on purpose I was hurt. I felt like you were rejecting me and everything I enjoy. I also felt like you didn't appreciate what I'd done for you. Buying you the gun. Teaching you to shoot. Planning this trip. Then it occurred to me that you're not me. I don't expect you to be me, and I wouldn't want you to be me. You're your own man. Just because I like to hunt doesn't mean you like to hunt. And telling me you missed that deer on purpose had to be one of the toughest things you've ever done. I'm proud of you."

Ryan didn't know what to say. He felt choked up, but he was too old to cry. He finally managed to stammer "Thanks, Dad."

"Let's go see if we can talk your mother into making us a real breakfast," his father said as he tousled Ryan's hair. They got out of the car and walked into the house together.