

# PAST HUNTING

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The fireplace couldn't quite reach him where he sat, facing its flickering light, the coals in need of stirring. Casting a glance toward the metal stick prodding the hearth's side, he warred, but eventually got back to work, rifle in hand. *Clean, check, lubricate, reassemble.* They were barely his fingers, removing components with care, magazine set aside. Taking a cloth, he moved from action, bolt, receiver, barrel with his father's voice in ear, the approving grumble as intrinsic to the process as the actions themselves.

As a boy, Cooper's brothers helped father where they could, gathering supplies, clothing the hounds, and loading the car. He would be left to the cleaning, sat alone in the logged house, until he was finished. A rough pat on the shoulder signified appreciation's beginning and end, the group finally piling into the truck, dogs lying across laps and feet. Those days marked the only times the four of them were all together, mom left in solitude, waving them off on their wrapping porch with fondness. As the car navigated their long driveway, she would not waver. Akin to a fleck of paint on a canvas, she remained stagnant, greeting them with that affectionate wave. He often wondered if their absence was so potent — so uncharacteristic — she'd grow immobile, unsure what to do without feet romping across floorboards and boys chasing one another, shouts resounding and bodies scuffling.

Denny's head lifted as he clicked the magazine back in place, the foxhound's body curled by the hearth, languid so far, aware it wasn't quite his time yet. Locking eyes, Denny's tail wagged slightly, the thump of it muted from the blanket he'd dragged off the couch to lie on. Sighing, Cooper got up, slinging the rifle over his shoulder, strap stopping the momentum of his carelessness, weapon thudding gently against his back on the rebound.

Traveling from living room to kitchen, he nodded toward various heads on the walls, their expressions serene — or perhaps vacant. The habit was one shared by the entire household apart from mom, who — depending on her mood — had carried through without recognition, or pet them carefully, giving attention to each one. It was more than she'd considered the dogs, whom she banned from the house due to an allergy, forcing the boys to strip their outer garments before entering if they'd been out roughhousing, the chill nipping their flesh on the porch. Their yelps, she'd tease, sounded like the hounds', and in return, they'd stick out their tongues, knowing she'd tease them for "panting" next, ushering them inside with a whistle, smile crinkling.

He grabbed two plastic-wrapped sandwiches and a bottle of water, remembering to snag another as Denny's claws clicked closer, a thrill already transforming his furred body from something domestic to wild, muscles flexing, stretching for the running soon to come. He unpacked one, ripping off chunks of white bread and ham hastily as he poured a cup of coffee, gulping that down just as efficiently. Passing a cabinet, Cooper ripped open a new bag of treats tucked in the back, shoveling some into his pocket as the coffee's warmth

faded from his throat. Closing it, he noticed Denny had sidled closer, almost leaning against his side, staring up with a doleful look, features arranged to their most pitiful. He waited a moment, listening for a whine; it did not come.

"Later," he said gruffly, aiming for the coat closet. Stripping right in the entryway, he shivered, Denny watching a few paces away. Reaching for the stack of clothes he'd brought down last night, he began to layer. Covertly, snow had built up in the dark, undoing yesterday's shoveling. Dragging a hand through his beard, a sigh unfurled, spreading painfully through the silence of the house.

It didn't need done now, he decided, continuing to pile on layers, zipping a camo coat devoid of scent. The absence of a distinct marker had always unnerved him, usually surrounded by hearty smelling stews and wet fur, tapped maple syrup and freshly chopped wood. While those were no longer common, he sometimes would walk from room to room, or roam along the property, and be struck with phantom scents in the air, dazing and nostalgic. Remembering the dog treats, he picked up the worn pair of jeans tossed on the floor. Back to the kitchen he went, snatching another plastic bag from the drawer and stuffing the slabs of artificial jerky inside. One fell from his grip, hitting the tile with a thwack.

"Here Denny!" he called, but the dog did not come. Kicking the treat with a socked foot, he guided it back to the front door, where Denny himself was neatly sat, eyeing the snow. "Denny!" No response. "I've got you a treat!" Nothing. Shedding the now offensive socks, he exchanged the pair, leaving them crumpled with the jeans. He pulled out the rarely donned boots, forcing one foot, then the other, into their dense caverns. Picking up the rifle propped by the door, he flung it over his shoulder once more.

"Come on now, ya beagle," he commanded, giving his thigh a short slap, father's long-standing joke sounding flat on his tongue. Denny shifted his head, finally acknowledging him. Almost immediately, he got lost in the house, staring off intently. Cooper leaned down, grasping his collar, an urgency building in his bones. The leather was wearing thin in some places, but the craftsmanship held, beautiful edges cut and finished to perfection. Father made one for all the hounds, taken from the first deer they helped bring down; usually, they lasted the dogs' entire lives.

Denny refused to budge in that impossible way dogs manage, somehow centering their mass to remain entirely still, no matter the pulling.

In the summer months, father would hose the hounds down outside, and in the winter, they rolled in the sparkling snow, jumping into snow drifts. On evenings after hunts, the landscape would be stained pink from rubbed muzzles and coats. From his place in the yard, Cooper would observe his mom slump over the porch fence, intrigued by the color play as sunlight dipped below the tree line, brightening the unusual hues. One winter day, Remington — a young pup at the time, barely trained — had snuck off into the woods, slinking back to father's calls with dozens of quills agonizing every step. They had all been horrified, the poor creature looking like a porcupine himself. Despite the pain — or perhaps because of it — he had stilled in the doorway of the bathroom, plopping himself down miserably. It was difficult to grab his collar through the plethora of quills, but father had, attempting to get him forward. Remington resisted, as Denny did now.

Cooper and his brothers had gathered round, watching the scene, there to help if father called their names; instead, mom turned the corner, gave a disapproving hum,





then shooed father away. Hanging a piece of roast beef before Remington enticingly, she goaded him through the door, clicking it shut. He emerged — hours later — quill free, hives on mom's arms.

"Let's go!" burst from him in frustration, fighting a losing battle. Denny, in a moment of lax recovery, broke free and went over to the closet door, dragging a paw along its surface insistently. After, he shook his coat. The damn vest, of course. Retracing his steps, he opened it once more and grabbed the requested item, clipping it on. Denny's hide was largely concealed by a brilliant orange.

Muttering to himself, man and dog made their way into the cold morning, consumed by scraggly, white-covered wood. Denny took the lead, traversing the snow with an ease Cooper envied, his own efforts clunky by comparison. Despite the swath of forest around their house, his father preferred to travel, meeting up with several buddies and their dogs: a singular unit poised to track and kill. The deer barely stood a chance, roughly a dozen hounds flushing them out for the final shot. Cooper, however, knew the group was dismantled long ago, the men of his youth in their graves or nursing homes.

He missed the comradery of it all, the adrenaline of sprinting through the trees, the whooping of men after a takedown, father's wide smile and swollen-knuckled hands taking his hounds' faces and stroking them triumphantly, unfettered praise sustained through the drive home, a dog riding alongside him in front, boys all the more crammed in the back for it.

Nothing ever changed, not even at the end, father calling Denny's name on his deathbed, tucked away in their home's master bedroom. He needn't have bothered; his loyal hound lay by his side, welcome in the house since mom passed. Cooper had heard the yell, sprinting upstairs, hovering in the doorway as the old man glided his hands along the only coat left, father's other dogs either dead or with Cooper's brothers. He had died that way, praise for his hound on a stiff, chapped mouth.

Suddenly, Denny darted into the brush, and Cooper could recognize a dog hot on the trail. He followed diligently behind, tracking orange amongst the barren wood, no other color in sight. Everything narrowed, the blur on each side akin to riding through town on late nights, face pressed against glass, car window cool on his forehead. His eyes would lift and fall, unfocused and dreamy, father's voice still thick with approval in the front. In those half-awake moments, he could transport back to the morning, when father's hand curled around his shoulder. Refocusing, he realized the mass that was Denny had vanished. Swallowing the hound's name, Cooper ground to a halt, snow creeping up the sides of his boots.

Five minutes later, Denny became visible once more, making his way back. As he drew closer, Cooper noticed the rabbit in his mouth, caught all on his own. Its blood rolled down from tooth to maw to forest floor. They stared at one another, prey in between them. Denny dropped it, body splayed, eyes boring up at him. He paid it no mind, watching Denny lick his chops, tongue curling around canine briefly, shining it white once again. Cooper continued forward, leaving the rabbit stranded behind: unacknowledged.

A worn creature lingered. Each limb trembled, exhaustion steaming out in voracious pants, breath traversing the air in cloudy gusts. Snow adhered to his pelt, hardening to clumps of ice that clung to his legs and underbelly, unprotected by the blazing orange cover denouncing his wild nature. He did not belong here, something too old to have survived without human aid, the white around his nose infecting the rest of his face, hairs



wrapping around eyes and ears. As he finally walked after his master, hips shifted with obvious discomfort, better spent immobile than navigating the trees, stamina nearly spent.

Steaming himself, Cooper gripped the strap of his rifle, repeatedly squeezing. The youngest of three boys, mom had finally conceded on the naming front, satisfied with Charles and Christopher, only insisting that his father stick to Cs. From the story he'd gotten, mom pestered about the names father had picked, but he refused to budge, teasing that her indecisiveness left him in the dark as well. Huffing, but trusting him, she eventually stopped questioning, though by then, his brothers carried the mantle for her, trying — and failing — to subtly trick their father into confessing. He would verbally run them in circles until they realized their scheme was uncovered, stomping off petulantly. No, it was not until his birth certificate that his name was uttered at all — unless his father had parsed it out with the hounds. Cooper Warrington: emblazoned and permanent, much to his mom's initial horror. Because, of course, Cooper's father had named the boy after his first ever dog.

In his frustration, he missed what was right in front of him: a doe. His footfalls had become heavier, practically dragging through the terrain. Noticing them, she began to flee, and Denny, instinct kicking in, pursued. Denny was once again a flash in Cooper's eye, though if he were level-headed, he would know both were slower than typical: one old, the other wounded — bullet already lodged in her side. Sluggish from pain, she was at most trotting, with Denny gaining the advantage from the privilege of being well-rested.

Her collapse — swift and sudden — left her dying on the ground, movements hollow. Denny was at odds, looking from her to Cooper, waiting. And Cooper, well, he couldn't stray from the hound, hulking over that terrified doe whose body was giving up on her. Lifting his arms, he felt himself get in position. His father guided him, forcing the rifle into exactly the right spot. He was supposed to say, "Good boy, Denny" and ruffle his face, maybe push it against his leg and give the ears a nice scratch. Of course, only after he shot the doe, concluding the hunt. He was losing time — had already lost so much — so he studied her alone, finding the emptiness he walked past every day reflected back.

Denny let out a whine, that same grieving sound he made as Cooper's father grasped at final breaths, croaking out a final reassurance: Cooper'll look after you.

Breathe in. He scanned Denny. Breathe out. He shot.✱