



WILD
THINGS

FOUR TALES

DOUGLAS
CLEGG

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"THE WOLF"

BY

DOUGLAS CLEGG

The wolf had come down from the mountains in March and killed sheep on the local ranches. After several weeks of this, parties of hunters went out to kill the wolf but none returned with the prize. More sheep would be taken before summer began. No one knew if the wolf would leave with the heat or stay in the valley.

A rancher who had lost many sheep hired a man of some reputation with wolves to come in from another county. This rancher also hired a local boy who had worked the ranch to go with the man up into the mountains.

The boy would be eighteen by summer and wanted to make something right with the rancher. He knew how to use a rifle and how to track game, although he had never hunted a wolf before.

The man preferred to hunt alone, but allowed the boy to go along with him.

The man and the boy had been tracking the wolf since sunrise but by the time the moon came up they made camp along the ridge. "Put your rifle over there," the man told him, pointing to a pile of rocks covered with fern. "Always put your rifle as far from you and the fire as possible. Accidents happen when they're too close. We don't sleep with the guns. The wolf won't attack us. It's sheep he's after, not you. Not me."

The boy questioned the wisdom of this idea. He liked to have his rifle close to him when he hunted. After a few minutes of consideration, the boy decided that the rancher had hired the man to lead, and he would let him. The boy also had done something he wished he hadn't that afternoon: he shot at what he thought might be the wolf, but turned out to be a silver fox.

By the fire, after supper, they sat across from each other. "We might have had him at the bluffs," the man said. "He's smarter than us, I think."

"I didn't mean to shoot at it," the boy said.

"It doesn't matter."

"I thought I saw him."

"Foxes can look like wolves, sometimes. Coyotes, too."

"It was a stupid mistake."

"I don't care. You're young."

"I'm the best hunter for a hundred miles."

"I can tell."

"Mister, maybe they pay you money to hunt wolves, but when I hunt, it's for the love of the sport," the boy said. "I can take anything out fast. Once I target it, it's mine and that's the end of it."

"I'm not here to argue with you, son."

"I'm not your son."

They went silent again. After relieving himself in the woods, the man checked the rifles, and then felt for the small gun beneath his jacket. The man returned to the fire and saw that the boy still sat there.

"We need to get up before first light," he said.

"How many wolves you kill?" the boy asked.

"What?"

The boy glared at him in the firelight. "How many?"

"Twenty. Maybe more."

"That's not a lot."

"No," the man said. "It's not."

"When I'm your age, I bet I'll have more than twenty pelts."

"I don't keep souvenirs like scalps," the man said. "You need to sleep closer to the fire. Take your coat and anything in your pack. Cover yourself good. In a few hours, it'll be colder than you can imagine."

"I hunt a lot," the boy said. "I know how cold it gets up here."

The man did not sleep much. Just before dawn, he rose and rekindled the fire and drew an old rusty skillet from his pack. He made breakfast with the meager supplies he'd brought.

The boy awoke to the smell. After a mug of coffee he began to laugh.

"You look like crap," the boy said.

They wandered off the main trails that morning. The man saw evidence of the wolf's having passed through a route between narrow rocks. There was blood of fresh kill and the rotting smell of a dead animal in the air as they moved further along through the pines. He motioned for the boy to remain still. The man went up along moss-covered rock, through underbrush, and until he came to the edge of a cliff overlooking

the valley. He glanced out over it to see the distant lake and the dots that were the ranches. Nearby, he watched three white-tail deer in a clearing made by treefall, but let them pass.

He sensed the wolf, but did not see him.

The boy followed him up the trail. When he drew close, the man whispered to him, "He knows we're following him. This is a problem now. Yesterday, he didn't know."

The boy remained silent until they made camp for the night.

"It ain't my fault."

"No one's blaming you."

"You are. You think I scared him off when I shot my rifle."

The man continued to peel an apple as he leaned back against his pack. "You can't look for blame all the time."

"It was one mistake," the boy said. "I won three hunting trophies before I was fifteen."

The man glanced at him, nodding.

"I bet they paid you a lot of money to do this," the boy said after a minute. "I bet it's a racket you got. You set wolves free down in the valley. Then, eventually, the ranchers hire you."

The man laughed at first. "There would be easier ways to make a living."

"I just can't figure why they'd hire a stranger when we got a lot of hunters in the valley," the boy said. "That's all I mean."

"What did you do that makes you special to that town?" the man asked.

The boy wouldn't tell him. He shook his head and said, "I just hunt. That's all. I can hunt and trap and shoot. I win a lot of trophies at the fairground. I can shoot just about anything. Could since I was a boy. First kill was a rabbit when I was ten."

"Jack rabbit?"

"Peter Cottontail," the boy said.

The man said, "What's the last thing you killed?"

The boy didn't answer.

The man said, "First thing I ever killed was a wolf. I was younger than you. You kill a wolf, you start to understand it."

After that, there wasn't much talk around the fire, and the man chuckled to himself when he rolled over to sleep. They had to sleep close beside each other for warmth. The boy's breathing kept him awake for another two hours.

The next day, they went off toward Needle Heights where the bony points of the mountain led into the range leading up north.

The boy asked him what he smelled in the air and what signs of the wolf he followed, for the boy could not track as well as the man and knew it. At twilight, the man told him, "I learned from the old mountain men when I was a boy. There are ways to track wolves. Different from tracking other animals. There was a mountain man, half-Cherokee half-Scot. That old man took me out to hunt wolves back in the days when we all hunted

wolves. He told me that a wolf that got a taste for sheep draws other wolves down to the ranches. You have to kill them before they can get back up to their pack. Usually, it's the young males. You see it with them first. Old wolves, they know not to go in the valleys, to the ranches. The young ones just see sheep and want them. We tracked this wolf for nine days. When we finally cornered him, he didn't seem like a wolf anymore. He seemed like a man. I felt as if I knew him, just like I know you. I saw his eyes and I could almost tell what he was thinking. He wanted what you might want. Yes, you. What a lot of men want. He wanted a bite of it. A piece of it. He had wiles and instinct. He knew that if he found a pen full of sheep he might eat better than if he spent his time chasing deer or rabbit."

"Wolves are like rabid dogs," the boy said.

"You just never met one yet," the man said. "They're smart. When they feel threatened, they attack. When you hunt a wolf you don't let him know he's being hunted until you absolutely have to do it. You wait. You

have patience. You let him think you're just part of the scenery. Just another wolf, maybe. This wolf. He's just looking for the sheep and a place to hide. When he finds the prize sheep, that's the one he wants. He doesn't want the sickly or the scrawny. He wants the best."

"It's funny we kill 'em, then," the boy said. "'Cause that's the way some people are. Some people I could name. Where I live."

"Wolves know each other," the man said. "When I had that wolf cornered, when I was younger than you, that wolf looked at me and knew I was a wolf, too. He'd met his match. Only I wasn't a wolf until that day. I didn't want to take a bite of anything until that day. You think you're a wolf, son?"

"A wolf? No."

"Some people are sheep. Maybe most people. And a few people in a thousand may be the vigilant dog that guards the sheep. Now and then, there's even a shepherd. But whenever a group of sheep are together, a wolf always comes 'round. You can count on it. That's why I get work. I'm

an expert at wolf killing. They know it in towns in this region. Somebody talks to somebody, and they call me in and pay my fee," the man said.

"And I track the wolf. I don't make errors. I don't let the wolf know he's being tracked. I usually work alone. I make sure the wolf I kill is the wolf that's causing distress for people. I don't just kill wolves because I can. I find the right wolf and I do my business."

"I think all of them should just be killed. Every wolf. They all eventually will come down to the sheep. That's what I think," the boy said.

"That would be wrong," the man said, looking the boy in the eye.

"What if a man killed another man? Should all men be killed because that one man murdered? Of course not."

"We're talking wolves, not men."

"Some men are wolves," the man said.

When they had crossed into the deep forest the man thought for sure the wolf was near. He motioned for the boy to remain silent and at

the ready. The man pointed toward the ramble up ahead, overgrown with dead vines. He gave the signal for the boy to step ahead.

The boy had raised his rifle up and stepped slowly between the rocks and trees.

Breaking the silence, the man said, "I was wrong. It's not him."

The boy glanced back at him. His face gleamed bright red with sweat and hope. "How do you know?"

"It's a bitch," the man said. "With cubs. We don't hunt like that."

The boy moved forward. The man shot his rifle into the air.

Birds flew out from the underbrush. The boy turned around in surprise and then anger.

At camp that night, the boy said, "You did that on purpose."

The man nodded. "We are after one wolf only. We don't shoot any others."

"How do you know she wasn't the wolf?"

"I know the wolf is male from its spore and spray. I know its size. I know the color of its coat. And I know its track. This was not our wolf."

"I say kill them all," the boy said.

"You're not a hunter if that's how you feel," the man said. "You may win a hundred trophies, son, but a hunter does not wish to kill them all."

"I hate wolves," the boy said. "I'm tired. I want to go home. The food is awful. Your coffee's awful. I want to be in my bed. At home."

"I know you do," the man said. "You shouldn't have come with me. But here you are. Make the best of it. We'll have him soon."

The boy's lip turned up a bit, almost a snarl. "That was a mistake, what you did. Shooting like that. Warning him. He was probably nearby."

"Everyone makes mistakes."

The boy was silent. "I bet when they hired you..."

"They?" the man asked.

"The people in town. The ranchers. I bet when they hired you they thought you'd have this done fast. They sent me to learn from you, I bet. Learn. What I learned so far is you worry about wolves too much."

"I wasn't hired by people. I was hired by a person."

The boy thought about this for a moment, and seemed to chew on it.

"The rancher."

"You see him as a rancher. I know him as a man who lost his only daughter."

The boy went silent for several minutes as the man watched him.

Then, the boy said, "Not my fault, either."

"I believe you," the man said.

"I didn't do that to her," the boy said.

"I believe you," the man said. "But he hired me to track this wolf. You came along because he wanted you to see what kind of wolf this was, I guess. That's all."

"She was a good girl," the boy said. "We would've been married if...it doesn't matter. It was an accident."

"I know nothing about her or you," the man said. "I just know I was hired to track the wolf that's been killing sheep. You are the local boy who has all the hunting trophies. So you came with me."

"I wanted to help him. Her father. To make up for it," the boy said.

"If it was an accident," the man said, "then there was nothing to make up for." The man saw the boy shift a bit and then close his eyes as if he had begun trying to recall why he had agreed to track the wolf with the stranger at all.

The man glanced over at the rifles placed well-beyond the fire in a ditch between rocks and a rotting log.

The boy began to stand up as if thinking about the rifles, as well.

The man drew out the gun tucked under his coat and pointed it at the boy. "Stay where you are, son," he said.

"You're not tracking a wolf," the boy said.

The man got up and stepped around the fire. He crouched beside the boy.

He whispered to the boy that he should not be afraid.

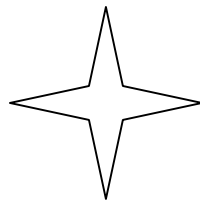
The boy looked as if he might turn and run at any minute but the man's whispers calmed him slightly. The man spoke about how everything would be all right. He told the boy that he was just imagining a problem that did not exist.

"I didn't kill her," the boy said. "Her father is crazy. I didn't kill her. She decided to do what she did. I had no part of it. I was hunting with my uncles. She thought I abandoned her. I would've married her. I would've come back. If I had known. I would have. She was good. She was a wonderful girl. I knew I wanted a girl like that. Any man would. You would've if you had known her. She was like an angel to people. I saw it the minute I laid eyes on her. She was one of the good ones."

The man pressed the gun to the side of the boy's head. "Most people are sheep," the man said. "A few are the dogs that guard the sheep. Now

and then there is a shepherd, but they are rare. But there are always wolves. A wolf wants to find the best of the sheep and devour it. That is all a wolf wants to do when it finds sheep. That is all it can do."

After the man bound the boy's hands and legs he went to get his rifle. He stood several feet back from the boy, estimating where best to make the killing shot.



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