Angels Crest

Leslie Schwartz

Chapter 1

ETHAN

Ethan woke slowly. The metal scent of a storm in the air. His heart quickened at the marvel of his life. Me, he thought, and the word came and went like a flash of light.

He got out of bed and put on his jeans. On a pallet on the floor, Nate lay sleeping. Ethan stood for a moment and gazed at him. Since the day his son was born, Ethan had always thought of Nate as his North Star.Now, he bent down and pushed the hair back from Nate's forehead.

"C'mon, buddy, time to go."

Nate stirred. Ethan didn't bother to change him out of his footie pajamas; he simply put a parka over him and picked him up. He knew, if need be, there was a pair of shoes in the truck.

"Balloon, Daddy,"Nate said, still half asleep.

Ethan bent down and picked up the now-deflated balloon from Nate's third-birthday party the day before.Nate grabbed it and held on to it while Ethan shimmied into his coat, balancing Nate first in one arm, then the other.He was getting so big, almost too heavy to hold anymore.

Dawn was at least an hour away. It was cold, but Ethan could feel the subtle warmth of the coming snowstorm.He knew by the fragrant scent in the air that the storm was close. It was early for snow—just the first of December— but Ethan could feel how it threatened, how monstrous it would be. He imagined the way the clouds had journeyed almost four hundred miles from the coast along the jet stream, packing more and more power on their way here, to this place, on this day of his life.

He bundled his son into the car seat and started the truck, turning the heat on. As he pulled out of the driveway and drove down the dirt road to the main highway,Nate said, "Brother Powell says I need to go to church."

He said "Brother" like "bruver." And the r was missing from "church." It killed Ethan, the way Nate talked, the things he came up with. Once, he called a daddy longlegs a long-legged daddy, and Ethan had to pick him up and hold him and kiss him after that.

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Still, no matter how charmed, Ethan had to make an effort now to keep the asshole out of his voice.He'd never liked Brother Powell, but he tried to make his tone smooth, without too much sentiment.

"We're going to church now, buddy."

"We're going to the woods, Dad."

"Well, a church doesn't have to have four walls and a door to be a church."

Ethan heard the edge in his voice.He wanted to go on, but Nate had already lost interest, and by the time they had driven a mile out of town toward the mountains, he had fallen back to sleep. Ethan drove up the winding, narrow roads, higher and higher. Darkness was giving way to a weak, gloomy light. He thought of Nate at the Christian preschool. He had no choice but to send him there. He would not lose the full custody he'd just won because he didn't like the church school mandated by the settlement. He didn't like church schools and things that were organized, like religion and politics. But Ethan chose his battles well. The woods could knock the Jesus out of anyone, if you went there enough. So that's what Ethan would do. Indoctrinate his son with the divinity of the forest.

Ethan wished the storm had waited another two days. Or that hunting season really opened this morning. He knew, from years of hunting, that deer stuffed themselves with zeal before a storm. Though they were swift and intelligent animals, they were also lazy. Ethan had learned that they did not like to expend too much energy searching for food.That meant on a day like this, they'd be everywhere, eating along the game trails, gathering nervously in the valleys, seeking shelter against the cliff faces. Easy targets.

Eventually, he made his way to the fire road that ended at the old Angels Crest trailhead.He loved this spot.He felt the anticipation inside him, like a tight wire holding him together. He wished he could hunt today, but he was not the sort to stoop to poaching.

He let the engine idle and watched the forest.Very few people knew of this place. Very few people would undertake it. It was the hard way up to Angels Crest, and Ethan knew that most hunters were too lazy and liked to drink too much to find the footing a place like this required. It was a beautiful spot, with woven carpets of arctic willow spreading out among the towering stands of pine and fir. In the distance, the tip of Angels Crest glowered above the clouds.He had never been up there in a storm. But he could well imagine the fury.

Almost immediately, he spotted a mature buck over the rise.He looked back at his son.This was what he had come here for, as he did almost every day, to show Nate the beauty of the woods, the wildlife, the sanctity of this place. But Nate was fast asleep. Ethan felt a twinge of regret, but he didn't want to wake his boy.He turned back toward the woods, and two more buck appeared over the ridge. He thought he

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would go have a quick look, track them for a minute.He promised himself he'd keep the truck in sight and not venture too far.

He turned off the engine, pocketed the keys, and looked back at his son. Fast asleep. He looked out beyond him. The lure of the woods was like a drug to Ethan. He felt the sway and pull of the forest as if it touched him, tugged on his coat sleeve.

He quietly shut the door and headed into the forest. He left the gun in the truck. It was an ancient dual-sighted .30-30 Savage he'd bought in Los Angeles at an army-surplus store years before and then restored and maintained. He knew there were better guns out there. But over the years, Ethan had grown used to the old Savage. He knew its rhythms and feel. It was a gun that rarely failed him.

The buck had gone upwind, into a narrow crag. Ethan walked a few feet and then stopped to look back at the truck.He could still see it, still see the outline of the car seat and Nate, his head forward in sleep. He told himself he'd go a little farther and only for another minute. He wasn't a gambling man, especially when it came to Nate. But those buck were beauties.Mature trophy buck. They'd provide food for the rest of the winter and an enviable rack for the garage wall.

He walked a ways longer and then, pausing, stopping, gambling, he followed the deer trail into a steep ravine, where the vanished glaciers had left behind silver-white rock surfaces, so polished and smooth that one day last spring, Ethan had watched as Nate licked the side of one. He remembered he hadn't stopped his son, only wished that he had thought to do it himself.

The deer themselves were out of sight, but Ethan, who had trained himself to spot such things, knew that they would keep traveling in the same direction, into the wind.They would not venture into the open ground.They would stay under the cover of trees and close to canyon walls, hidden among the kalmia and cassiope.

Once more, Ethan looked back. The truck was no longer visible, but he knew it was not far. He told himself that just this once, he'd keep walking. Luck was with him. Hadn't he just won custody, full custody, of his son? Hadn't most things gone his way in life? He figured that just this once, he could let his guard down.He'd walk just a few more feet along this old, nowabandoned trailhead, savor the solitude, forget just for a brief moment all of his responsibility and pretend. I am free. Then he'd get back to the truck— Nate would probably still be asleep—and head into town to open the hardware store.Maybe on the way home,Nate would wake up and Ethan would tell him how beautiful the woods were, how fine and strong the deer. He would promise to take him out again later, because Ethan knew Nate would be disappointed to have missed this morning sojourn.

The air felt tense. It would probably snow within the hour. He walked on, lured, as if to a woman, by the balm of his solitude.He thought aimlessly about his failed marriage, the custody battle he'd just won, but the cost at which it had come. He thought about how pitiful it was that lately all his sexual pleasure had come from the labor of his hands, burrowing into the bed. A mattress, he thought, was a poor substitute for a woman.He thought about the hardware store.Taxes were due on the

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building; money was short. Why had he bought the place? He knew at the time that he could barely afford it.

He walked on a few more feet, and there before him the buck stood ma- jestically, partially hidden by a hedge of alpine goldenrod and the dry brown Indian summer grasses. The animals were so beautiful, so regal. He felt strangely joyous and relieved.

But then, as if coming to his senses after a long, slow dream, he looked at his watch and felt a shock. Fifteen minutes had passed. He couldn't believe it. How had he traveled this far for this long? What the hell had he been thinking? He felt a quickening and a tightening inside. Fifteen minutes at that pace meant he'd walked at least a mile into the woods. And then he thought of all the things he'd failed to think of before.He'd left the truck unlocked. Nate knew how to wiggle out of the car seat.He hadn't dressed him very warmly, hadn't even bothered to put on his shoes. Ethan knew in that surreal, certain way you do sometimes that he'd made a terrible mistake by letting the truck disappear from his view. Later, he would not be able to explain the certainty of his intuition, how clearly he knew he had gambled and lost.

He rushed quickly through the woods, not wanting to run because he was afraid to give in to the fear. He lost the scents of the woods, the earth smells, the smell of iron in the brewing storm.The world around him passed by in a blur.There were no longer distinct trees with buck rub or bear claw. Instead, there was a flurry of trees. Cartoon trees in a cartoon forest. He thought of Nate. His most beautiful son, his North Star. Nate, whom he'd finally, finally won for himself.

By the time he reached the clearing where he'd parked the car, the snow had started to fall, and Ethan saw, as he knew he would, that the door to the truck was open. His heart went to his throat. His head burst into pain, sharp and blinding. He felt himself splitting apart, everything about him tearing wide open.

"Nate," he yelled. "Nate."

There was no answer. Ethan raced to the truck. Nate was gone. He'd taken the deflated balloon and vanished into the woods.

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