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The Poacher's Son

Written by Paul Doiron

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THE POACHER'S SON

Paul Doiron

CRIME

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PROLOGUE

When I was nine years old, my father took me deep into the Maine woods to see an old prisoner of war camp. My mom had just announced she was leaving him, this time for good. In a few weeks, she said, the two of us were chucking this sorry, redneck life and moving in with her sister down in Portland. The road trip to the wild country around Spencer Lake was my dad's idea. I guess he saw it as his last chance to win me over to his way of thinking. God knows he didn't really want custody of me. I'd just get in the way of his whiskey and his women. But it mattered to him that I saw his side of things.

And so, one rainy morning, we drove off into the mountains in search of the past.

It was a grueling drive. The logging road was muddy and deeply rutted from the heavy trucks carrying timber out of the clear cuts, and it was all my dad's tired old Ford could do to climb Bear Hill. Pausing at the top, we looked out across the Moose River valley to the forested mountains that marked the border with Canada. I'd lived my entire life in rural Maine, but this was the wildest place I'd ever been. Soon I would be leaving it—and him. Like most small boys I'd always viewed my father as the strongest, bravest man in the world. Now I couldn't understand why he wasn't fighting to keep us all together.

My dad was silent for the first hour of the trip—he was hungover,

chain-smoking—but as we drove deeper into the woods he finally started to talk. Not about my leaving, though. Instead he told me how, during World War II, thousands of captured German POWs were brought to the most remote parts of Maine to work in the logging camps. He said the prisoners at Hobbstown Plantation, where we were going, had belonged to Field Marshal Rommel's Afrika Korps. They'd driven panzer tanks through Sahara sandstorms and fought desert battles at Tunisia and El Alamein. The foreign names stirred my imagination, and despite the sadness that was my perpetual condition back then, I found myself leaning forward against the dash.

"Don't expect too much," he warned. These days, he said, all that was left of the guard towers, barracks, and fences that once made up the Hobbstown POW camp were a few log cabins, hidden among the pines. Trappers sometimes holed up in these old buildings in the wintertime. Otherwise they were just a bunch of ruins rotting into the earth.

Actually, they were less than that. My dad drove by the clearing before he realized it was the place we were looking for. He climbed out of the truck and stood there in disbelief. No cabins were to be seen. There were just a couple of blackened cellar holes covered by tangles of wet raspberry bushes.

I stood beside him in the rain. "This is it?"

"I guess someone must've burned the cabins down."

"It's just some holes in the ground."

"It's still history," he argued.

Afterward, we drove down to Spencer Lake and parked at the shore, looking down the length of the lake, toward the mist-shrouded Bigelow Mountains. He turned off the engine and lit a cigarette and then, with the rain beating on the roof, he told me a story that has haunted me ever since.

He said that, during the winter of 1944, two Germans escaped from the prison camp. The guards located one right away by fol-

lowing his tracks in the snow. But the other, somehow, eluded capture. Game wardens and state police troopers joined in the search. Guards were put on high alert at the Kennebec River dam in case the Nazi saboteur tried to blow it up. And people in Flagstaff and Jackman slept with loaded shotguns under their beds. It was the biggest manhunt in Maine history—and they never found him. The prisoner just vanished into the wild and was never seen again, alive or dead.

"You'll find some loggers who say he's still out there," my dad said, "holed up in some cave, not knowing the war's over."

I looked hard into his eyes. "You're lying," I said.

But he wasn't lying. Years later, after my dad and I had settled into a life pattern of long estrangements punctuated by awkward visits, I read about the incident in a book. A German POW really had escaped from Hobbstown and was never seen again. And I didn't know what disturbed me more: that I had doubted my father reflexively, or the wistful look that came into his eyes as he told that story, as if his own greatest wish was to vanish into the woods and never return.

I

A black bear had gotten into a pigpen out on the Beechwood Road, and it had run off with a pig. There were bear tracks in the mud outside the broken fence and drag marks that led through the weeds into the second-growth timber behind the farm. The man who owned the pig stood behind me as I shined my flashlight on the empty pen. He had called me out of bed to drive over here, and his voice over the phone had been thin and breathless, as if he'd just run up a hill.

"Warden Bowditch," he said, "I never seen nothing like it."

His graying hair was wet from the rain that had just stopped falling. He wore an old undershirt stretched tight over his swollen belly and a pair of wash-faded jeans that hugged his hips and exposed an inch of white skin above the waistband. He carried a .22 caliber rifle over his shoulder, and he was holding a sixteen-ounce can of Miller High Life. His eyes were as red as a couple of smashed grapes.

It was a hot, humid night in early August. The thunderstorm that had just finished drenching midcoast Maine, five hours north of Boston, was moving quickly out to sea. A quarter moon kept appearing and disappearing behind raggedy, fast-moving clouds that trailed behind the storm like the tail of a kite. Crickets chirruped by the hundreds from the wet grass, and far off in the pines I heard a great horned owl.

The bear had clawed apart the plank fence as if it were a dollhouse, leaving a pile of splintered boards where the gate had been.

"Tell me what happened, Mr. Thompson," I said, moving the beam of the flashlight over the puddled ground.

"Call me Bud."

"What happened, Bud?"

"That bear just scooped him up like he was a rag doll."

I shined the light against the farmhouse. It was a clapboard frame building with a broken-backed barn that looked about to collapse and a chicken coop and toolshed out back. Behind the house was a dense stand of second-growth birch and alder with pine woods beyond. The bear had only to cross thirty feet of open field to get to the pigpen.

"You said you saw the bear attack him?"

"Heard it first. I was inside watching the TV when Pork Chop started screaming. I mean squealing. But you know it *sounded* like screaming." He slapped a mosquito on his neck. "Anyhow, I looked out the window, but it was raining, and I couldn't see a damned thing on account of how dark it was. Then I heard wood snapping and Pork Chop screaming and I grabbed my gun and came running out here in the rain. That's when I seen it."

Now that I was close to him I could smell the heavy surge of beer on his breath. "Go on."

"Well, it was a bear. A big one. I didn't know there were bears that big around here. It was reaching over the fence with its paw, leaning on the fence, and the boards were just snapping under its weight. And poor Pork Chop was back in the corner, trying to get away, but it wasn't any use. The bear just hooked him with its claws and pulled him in."

"How come you didn't shoot it?"

"That's the thing of it. I did, but I must have forgot to load the gun." He rubbed his hand across his wet eyes and shifted his weight

from one foot to the other. "It wouldn't have really attacked me, would it?"

"I doubt it." There are no recorded reports of fatal black bear attacks on humans in the state of Maine, but I'd read of fatalities in Ontario and Quebec, and it was probably only a matter of time until something happened here. "You were right not to provoke it, though. If you'd shot the bear with a .22 you probably wouldn't have killed it, and there's nothing more dangerous than a wounded animal."

Except a drunk with a gun, said a voice in my head.

"I loved that pig." He swung the rifle off his shoulder and held it up by the strap. "I wish I'd shot that son of a bitch."

"You shouldn't handle a firearm when you've been drinking, Bud."

"He was the smartest pig I ever had!"

I raised my flashlight so the beam caught him in the eyes. "Do you live alone here?"

Whether it was the light or the question that sobered him I don't know, but he blinked and ran his tongue along his cracked lower lip and looked at me with renewed attention.

"My wife's moved out for a while," he said. "But she'll be back before too long." His expression turned pleading. "You don't need to talk to her, do you?"

"No. I just wondered if anyone else saw what happened."

He scratched the mosquito bite on his neck. "I got an old dog inside. But he's deaf and just about blind."

"I meant another person. You said you hadn't seen the bear around here before. Is that right?"

"I didn't even know there were bears this near the coast. You don't think it'll come back here, do you?"

"Probably not, since you don't have another pig. But I see you keep some hens." I gestured with my flashlight toward the chicken

coop, using the beam to draw his attention. "The bear might come back for the hens, although I doubt it will. Why don't you go inside and put that gun away. I want to take a look in the woods."

He glanced at the trees and shivered. "Be careful!"

I watched him shuffle away into the house, head hanging, beer in hand. No wonder his wife left him, I thought. Then I remembered my own empty bed back home and I stopped feeling so superior. Sarah had been gone exactly fifty-five days. Earlier, I'd gone to bed thinking that it would be fifty-six days when I woke up, but that was before Thompson called. So here it was fifty-five days again.

I got to work measuring the paw prints in the mud. They resembled the tracks a barefoot person might leave walking along a beach. Judging by the distance between the front and hind feet, I figured it was a medium-sized bear, two hundred pounds or so.

I followed the drag marks through the field, and the rainwater that clung to the weeds soaked through my pants legs. The trail disappeared into the low bushes—scrub birch and speckled alder and sumac—that grew along the edge of the forest. I directed my light into the wet mass of leaves, half-expecting to see the beam reflected back by the eye shine of the bear's retinas.

Thompson's description suggested a curious young bear expanding its diet from berries and beechnuts to the other white meat. Probably the animal was miles away by now, having gorged itself on Thompson's beloved pig. Still, I found myself listening for anything to indicate the bear might be nearby. A mosquito whined in my ear. Ahead of me and all around, I heard trees dripping in the darkness. Switching the flashlight from my right hand to my left, I reached down to touch the grip of my sidearm. It was a heavy SIG SAUER P226 .357 Magnum that I had never fired except at a practice range.

I pushed my way into the forest. Beaded rainwater spilled off the leaves onto my shoulders and face. I was drenched in an instant.

After a few steps, I was through the green wall of bushes and saplings at the edge of the wood. Beneath the trees the air was still and heavy with the smell of growing things—as humid as a hothouse. I made an arc with the bull's-eyed flashlight beam along the forest floor, looking for drag marks. But the soft carpet of moss and pine needles had absorbed all traces of the bear's passing, and I saw no more blood drops. I wandered deeper into the woods, searching.

I found the pig a hundred yards in.

It lay on its side in a puddle of congealing blood. Its throat had been torn out, and its haunches had been chewed to a red pulp. The bear had not attempted to bury the carcass or cover it with leaves. It was possible it had heard me coming.

I switched off the flashlight and stood under the dripping trees, listening. I knew retired game wardens and ancient trappers who could hear the rustle a buck made passing through alders across a stream. Men who were so at one with the woods that they didn't fully exist among other human beings but were only truly themselves outdoors. Maybe someday I'd be one of those old woodsmen. But for the moment I was still a twenty-four-year-old rookie, less than a year on the job, and my senses told me nothing about where the bear was.

I turned the flashlight back on. Then I went up to the house to tell poor Bud Thompson what I had found.

By the time I got home it was well past midnight. I'd left the light on outside the screen door and moths were swirling about, butting themselves stupidly against the glass.

As I stepped inside, I was surprised again by my empty house. Sarah had taken most of the furniture with her when she moved out. It always startled me, coming home, to see how little I actually owned. Stacks of books and newspapers, a steel gun cabinet, fallen antlers I had collected in the snow.

Moonlight shined in through the windows, bright enough to see by, so I left the lights off as I moved through the house, shedding my damp shirt and boots as I went. I unbuckled my gun belt and put it away, then wandered into the kitchen. Frosty light spilled out of the refrigerator when I swung the door open. I found a bottle of beer and pressed it against my forehead as I made my way out into the living room.

I cracked open the beer and toasted Bud Thompson and Mike Bowditch—two womenless men dousing our loneliness with alcohol. Except that unlike Thompson, I had chosen to be alone. An empty house was what I'd wanted all along, even if it had taken Sarah years to realize it.

She'd hung in there with me from Colby College, where we'd met, through the Maine Criminal Justice Academy and the Advanced Warden Academy and my long weeks of field training. She'd toughed it out, thinking it was a phase I was going through, that eventually I'd go to law school like we'd talked about and become a prosecutor and maybe someday a judge. But it wasn't a phase, and it was only after I had gotten posted in coastal Knox County that she realized that being a game warden was a twenty-four-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week way of life, and for reasons neither of us fully understood, I'd chosen it over her.

So she left.

And I missed her—and counted the days since she'd gone away. But I was relieved, too. Relieved that I no longer had to justify my emotions to anyone else. I could spend the night alone in the woods searching for a dead pig and be content in a way that made absolutely no sense to anyone who wasn't a game warden. With Sarah gone, I could love this solitary and morbid profession without excuses and not have to look too deeply into the dark of myself.

That was when I noticed a small blinking light across the room.

It hadn't occurred to me to check my answering machine. I'd been gone only an hour and a half, and most everyone I knew had my

pager number if they needed to get a hold of me. My first thought was that it had something to do with the bear. Maybe someone else had seen it outside their house, or maybe it had gotten into another pigpen.

When I pushed play there was the raspy sound of breathing on the other end for a while before a man finally spoke: "Mike? Hello? Pick up if you're there." There was a long pause. Then, in the background, came a woman's voice: "Is he there?" The man said: "No, goddamn it! He's not home!" Followed by a disconnect.

I didn't recognize the woman, but the other voice was deep and monotone, just like mine, and hearing it again after two years was enough to start my pulse racing. Why was my father calling after all this time? What could he possibly want from me now?

I stood still in the dark while the tape rewound.