

## Mercy

In the stillness of the forest, a man is bent over, retying his son's dangling bootlaces. The son bites his lip. Father had already shown him how to tie them properly once. The man stands up, and walks ahead of his son, saying nothing.

Son follows with his head lowered, but soon regains the excitement of joining his father for the first time. He has a hard time keeping up with the pace while trying to match his steps with the faint imprints Father's boots stamp on the leaves and mud. Father stops, and Son runs into him before he notices. The man's sure eyes glare at his son's until he knows he will pay attention, and then he points to the ground. Son looks at where he is pointing, then back up at him, blank. Father sighs, and kneels down, laying aside his rifle, and continues to point. Son looks closer now and sees what could be an animal footprint. The father makes his other hand like claws, and mouths, "Wolf," then puts his index finger in front of his closed lips.

At the word *wolf*, Son lets out a quick gasp, then clamps a hand to his mouth and resumes his ashamed posture. But he notices something else in the mud and points to it. Father takes interest and studies the miniature version of the other paw print. He smiles at his son and rubs his hair.

Father stands up with the assistance of his rifle, and Son stands too, a little straighter this time. They continue, more cautiously than before, but they do not get far before a noise startles them, a menacing growl from not far away. Both of them dart their eyes around. The father spots a wolf and whips his rifle toward it, pulling back the hammer. He should shoot right now but needs to be careful. If he misses a vital point, he will have to reload which takes too long. He steps in front of his son.

The wolf is a female, gray and black, with eyes that desire blood. Most of her sharp, yellow teeth are visible in the snarl. She moves in front of her small cub, the only one unaware of the present danger.

Son sees the cub and tugs his father's coat and says, "Wait."

"Quiet," Father orders, but he decides to listen to his son's request. They slowly back away from the beast. The wolf continues a little toward them, still growling, but then gives up and runs off with her cub.

Father lets out an audible breath and relaxes his arms. Son does not relax as easily.

"Close call," Father says, "they are probably heading back to their den. If we go further east, we should steer clear of them." He starts marching forward, then adds, "No one lives after approaching a wolf den."

Son hesitates to follow after the scare. He wants to go home and sit with Mother by the fire, but he does not say that.

Father looks at him, "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Son says in a brave face.

"I know that must have been a frightening experience for you, but we need to keep moving. We haven't seen a single deer, not even a rabbit yet."

Son catches up. "I'm glad we didn't shoot them."

"We got lucky. Nature does not reward mercy."

They keep silent for thirty more minutes until they find a creek. After filling up water and chewing on dried meat, they continue and arrive at a large meadow. Trudging through the middle of it, they search for any hints of life in the tall grass. This goes on for a while until they come to a large grouping of rocks. Boulders are stacked on top of each other in such a way that the areas in between them would make adequate caves. Son's first impression is that the structure looks very fun to climb, but is surprised by Father's reaction.

Father nudges Son backward, and he obeys. Some noises come from one of the caves, and a wolf comes out that Son recognizes. The same cub also follows its mother and mimics her, sniffing in the air for something, but the mother growls at it and nudges it back inside. The wind blows from behind the humans, and the wolf catches the scent and turns in their direction. Son can see the aggression in her movement from this distance. Father looks very concerned, but his coat makes a good shield, and Son clings to it as tightly as he can.

An angry howl sounds.

They continue to retrace their footsteps, faster. "I should have killed it, I knew I should have," Father says, but then regrets the statement.

Another wolf comes bounding out of the cave, this one clearly a male. Several others follow, all full-grown, barking, snarling and howling. Father loses all hope. They had stumbled upon a den.

He fires a shot in the air, a loud crack. The wolves jerk in different directions, startled, but resume their angles of attack. Father fumbles to reload the single-shot Remington as the wolves fan out to surround their invaders.

Father knows that he will not be able to kill more than two of them with his gun. The nearest line of trees is over a hundred yards away, there is no way they can both outrun the wolves. The father looks at his son, then to the trees, then to his rifle, and closes his eyes.

Son is terrified and looks in his father's face for comfort, but his father is in the middle of making a very hard decision, and there is no comfort there.

Then Father opens his eyes, takes a deep, shuddering breath, and places the gun in his boy's hands, and says, "We can't both make it. Run."

"What?"

"They will chase me, and when they do, you need to run. If they come after you, climb a tree."

"I can't," Son tries to give the gun back.

Father pushes the heavy rifle back onto Son, "You only have time for one shot, make it count," and then he sprints toward the pack of wolves before his son can see the tears on his face.

"Dad!" Son shouts.

"Leave!"

When fathers use that tone, sons react on instinct. Son turns and runs away but looks back once he reaches the trees. The wolves are huddled in a circle in the tall grass, no longer chasing anyone. His father is not visible anymore.

He steadies his arm and aims the rifle at the pack. Father had only just taught him how to shoot. He pulls the trigger and feels a thundering shock, but it does not hit any of the targets. The wolves are startled and then go back to feasting.

If he had only kept his mouth shut in the forest.

He turns around and runs all the way home.

The return feels like it is not real, like a dream. The weight of the gun becomes burdensome, but he never loosens his grip on it, not even when he arrives at home and sits by the fire with Mother. He finally cries in her arms, but Mother does not understand the full reason.