

"What the hell was *that*?" Delmar asked softly, instinctively being as quiet as possible.

The strange howl was abnormal....strange...wolf-like but not—the howl was just *wrong*.

"Steven," Jenny whispered, "Please tell me you know what that was..."

"Yes, Steven," Thomas said dryly, doing his best to keep his voice from shaking. "Tell us that you've heard that sound before." His mind wandered through childhood memories—narrowing to a winter in Louisiana when he was just eleven years old. The howl called up memories of another hunt...one that he could never forget and before Steven could reply, he said, "I think I might have heard something like this before, when I was a kid." He stared though the window in the direction of the howl. "I was eleven, back home in Louisiana..."

Thomas aimed the old, single-shot 16-gauge shotgun. It was near midnight and he was standing in a soybean field with a very nice rabbit caught in the end of his headlamp. He couldn't miss. Tyrone whooped quietly and did a little circular dance around him after the shot and then he ran to gather the rabbit. He placed it in a pouch with the other three.

"I think that is enough. We've still got to clean them." Thomas said.

"I can't believe there's no fleas on these," Tyrone said, smiling. "We'll fry these tomorrow after we come back from fishing at Reeves' ponds."

Thomas was about to agree but stopped when they heard the loud roar of a truck coming down the dirt road at high speed. The two boys' figures were suddenly illuminated by several powerful spotlights.

"Game Wardens," Thomas shouted. He looked to the left, toward his house. They would have to cross the road if they ran that way and the Game Wardens would see right where they went. They'd take his shotgun away and make his dad pay a big fine. "Follow me," he shouted to Tyrone just as the

truck stopped near them, a bright light shining down on them the way the spotlight did on that singing frog in the cartoons.

They ran for the wood line to Thomas's right, reaching it just as a voice shouted through a bullhorn, "You boys get back here! Don't make t his hard on us, you hear? Don't do it!"

"Don't stop!" Thomas shouted.

They made it to the edge of the woods and plunged inside, switching off the spotlights. The trucks, two of them now, sped through the middle of the soy bean field, tires spitting up dust and soy bean vines. The trucks ran right up to the edge of the woods where they had entered. Thomas and Tyrone dove to the ground.

"You had to wear that damned yellow jacket," Tyrone said as the two boys crawled on all fours as fast as they could, trying to avoid the beams of light that shone wildly all around them.

"It's warm," Thomas protested, breathing heavily.

"It's *YELLOW*," Tyrone said.

"Shut up! And keep moving!"

The game wardens shouted and cursed at the boys for a few more minutes, threatening to come in and find them and take them both to jail. Thomas told Tyrone they were full of shit.

"They ain't following us in here at midnight on a Saturday. No way."

"Where the hell are we going," Tyrone asked as they crawled further and further into the woods and deeper into darkness.

"If we keep heading this way we will hit that old logging road—the one that has that old truck body on it. From there we will loop around my Granny's house and come back to mine."

"How far?"

"It ain't far. We gotta go this way so the Game Wardens can't say it was me."

"Okay, but can we at least get up now?"

Thomas stood up.

Tyrone stood up behind him. "Shit," he said.

"What's the matter?"

"I lost the damned rabbits. Shit, shit, shit."

Thomas sighed. "Well, we sure as heck can't go back and look for the bag. We'd have to use the lights."

Just then Thomas heard some heavy thuds not too far behind them. Then there was a growl. The boys froze and Thomas almost peed in his pants. In all of their eleven or so years of life, the boys had never heard such a sound.

Thomas's face went flush. He suddenly felt hot in the thick Yamaha motorcycle jacket. Tyrone made a quiet mewling noise and Thomas thought for sure he was about to start crying.

"Shhhhh," Thomas whispered. "We got a gun, remember?"

Thomas remembered he had not had time to reload the old single shot, shotgun. He quietly pulled the release lever and bent the barrel down, exposing the spent shell. He had waited too long, and the plastic shell had expanded. It would not come out without some serious prying with a knife.

"Son of a bitch," Thomas whispered. He suddenly realized that Tyrone was standing practically on top of his feet and was clinging to his left arm as if Thomas were his mother. The growl came again and this time it was accompanied by crunching sounds. Whatever it was, was growling as it apparently consumed one or more of the rabbits.

"Mmmmm," Tyrone whined softly.

"Shhhhh," Thomas said, prying at the shell with his Barlow knife blade. It finally came loose with a hollow, "pop."

The chewing and growling stopped the same moment as the shell popped loose. Something shuffled and then there was a definite thud as whatever it was moved closer. Thomas pulled a new shell from his pocket, rammed it into the breach, closed the barrel, pointed in the direction of the noise, and fired from the hip.

The night lit up with the huge blast from the shotgun. Tyrone screamed, and took off running, arms flailing. Thankfully, he was running in the right direction. His scream was contagious and Thomas realized he was yelling, too.

In the light of the shotgun blast he had seen something worth screaming about. Two huge red eyes shone back at him set high on a thickly furred black face. The face was as high off the ground as Thomas's chest and whatever it was it had jaws just like a wolf.

Thomas ran as fast as he could, blinded by the blast of light from the shot. How he managed to keep from slamming into a tree was something he would wonder for years to come. As he ran, still yelling wildly as he chased after Tyrone, who was also still screaming at the top of his lungs, Thomas opened the breach of the shotgun allowing the spent shell to pop out. He used two fingers of one hand to reach into the inner pocket of his jacket. That is where he kept several shells of number-one buckshot just in case they saw a deer. He had used number six squirrel-shot on the rabbits. Shot like that would not have harmed what Thomas had decided was a huge wolf. The buckshot, however, would do just fine.

He worked the buckshot shell into the breach and snapped the barrel closed. He caught up with Tyrone, who had stopped screaming and was merely sobbing now. In the distance, they heard the Game Wardens trucks roll onto black-top, far away from the dirt road. He suddenly wished they *had* come after them after all.

"Stop, Tyrone," Thomas tried to shout without shouting...forcing the words out in a loud and harsh whisper. "The logging road is right here!"

That got the boy's attention, and he did an about-face and hopped back onto the old logging road. Thomas jumped beside him and they both ran side by side, panting in the cold winter night. Tyrone flipped on his headlight.

"NO!" Thomas said, yanking the light off his head and switching it off. "You want the darned thing to see us?"

Tyrone stopped. "Give it back," he snarled.

"Shhhhh!"

"Listen!" Tyrone said, taking hold of Thomas's arm.

Thomas jerked his arm free.

It was coming up the road—and it was howling.

The growls from the animal had been the scariest sounds they had heard...until they heard the howls. Tyrone mumbled and suddenly dropped to his knees. That scared Thomas as badly as the howls. His friend was not going to make it.

Thomas grabbed a second buckshot shell from his jacket and put it in his mouth, holding it with his teeth. He grabbed another and kept it between two fingers.

"Get your ass up and get to Granny's house. It's only about a hundred yards."

Tyrone didn't move, and the wolf, if it was a wolf, sounded much closer now.

Thomas pulled Tyrone up and shoved him onward. The boy obeyed and broke into a run. Thomas ran, too, but he kept looking behind him. There was just enough moonlight and starlight out on the open road between the trees to allow him to see maybe thirty or forty feet.

Within seconds they could see Thomas's grandparent's home where the old logging road opened up into their backyard. The wolf growled again and Thomas heard the footfalls at the same time that he saw the shadowy figure loping toward them.

If it was a wolf, it was the *biggest one ever*, Thomas thought. It was as tall as Thomas was, and seemed to be loping more like a monkey than a wolf. Thomas stopped, threw the shotgun to his shoulder, and fired. He closed his eyes as he pulled the trigger, so that he would not be blinded again. His dad, a retired Marine, had taught him that trick.

The animal yelped as if it had been hit but then snapped and growled. Thomas reloaded as he ran. He broke out into his grandmother's backyard, thankful to see a light turn on at the back porch. He fired again, but forgot to close his eyes this time

and was temporarily blinded. He heard his grandfather yell and slam the porch door. Thomas reached him within seconds and dropped his shotgun in the dirt, grasping the old man around the waist. His grandfather had brought out his 12-gauge pump-action shotgun, and he used one hand to comfort Thomas, and the other to hold the big shotgun up, looking into the darkness. There was another howl, but it was now much farther away. The animal had turned and run.

Thomas and Tyrone had cried unabashedly for several minutes and Thomas begged for his grandfather not to go looking for the animal. The old man patted him on the shoulder, comforting him as he turned and led him into the house. Tyrone was already there, clinging to Thomas's grandmother on the porch.

A few days later, tales began to spread about a rogue wolf, something that had not been seen in Louisiana in a hundred years. It had torn into a pen full of beagle puppies, ripping through tough chicken wire to get at them. It killed them all without feeding on any.

Thomas's dad insisted that he lock their dog in their shed at night because a neighbor said that a night ago the biggest wolf he had ever seen had picked a fight with their German shepherd and had ripped it to pieces...even as the man fired at it with his shotgun. There was also a story in the local newspaper about cows that had been mutilated. Several had been killed and ripped open, but not eaten.

The wolf was tracked once, by the same man who lost the beagle puppies, but he lost the trail by the end of the first day. Eventually things settled down, the episodes were forgotten—but Thomas, and Tyrone could never forget. They would suffer from nightmares for months and Thomas never hunted their woods at night again.

He could feel the electricity in the air as he finished the story. He wondered if he should have recounted it at all. As if reading his thoughts, Jenny said, "Well, thanks a lot for that,

Thomas. I am *really* scared now." Thomas heard the teasing sarcasm but he knew there was some truth to her words.

Delmar stretched his long arms and yawned. "Let's not get all *weirded* out now. It's probably just a Timber Wolf, folks. Besides, it's far from us..."