

The bird they found, tangled in mesh and flapping feebly against the snow, was not normal.

Reverend Malcolm Hall folded his arms, leaning his rifle against an ice-crusting tree. His thick hunting boots sunk into the snow, digging the last in a trail of footprints weaving back into an endless forest. It was deep December, and right in the midst of his annual break from shepherding the wayward souls of his penitent Pennsylvanian congregation.

His son, Elijah, stooped to the ground.

“It’s a falcon?” Eli hazarded. It was certainly some bird of prey, with steel-blue facial feathers, a yellow beak, and speckled, downy wings. But its wings, its *shape*... Eli couldn’t place them. “Peculiar...” His brows knitted together. “She’s too big to be a peregrine, but the markings are wrong for anything else.”

Even more peculiarly, the bird had stopped squirming the moment the two approached. It now lay quite still, legs and wings ensnared in netting, and regarded the men with an eerie calm. Its black, yellow-rimmed eyes seemed to bore straight into Eli’s chest, through flesh and ligament and heart and lungs...

He edged back, pulse racing. “Not... not many falcons roost in winter,” he said.

Reverend Hall’s eyes flicked toward the forest floor. “What are those?”

All around the net, amidst snow scraped aside by the falcon’s struggles, were prints. The shallow indents of furry paws; the scabbling claws of opossums and porcupines; the cloven marks of stags; the tiny-pawed ghosts of squirrels and rabbits and chipmunks; the remnants of birds with long, spiny talons sinking into the frozen dirt... the bird lay in the middle of it all.

“It’s a fucking zoo,” Eli whispered.

Without warning, Malcolm wound back and slapped him across the face. Eli’s head snapped to his chest, stars bursting behind his eyes. He fell sideways against the tree.

Coolly, Malcolm said, “Watch your mouth.”

“Sorry,” Eli muttered, struggling to breathe. He tasted copper. For a long, tenuous moment, he kept his head bowed and his eyes downturned, heart pounding in his chest. Sharks, at times, returned to deceased prey.

The reverend merely snorted.

“Bag her anyway,” he said. “Gotta be good for something.”

Elijah reached for a sack. Malcolm trudged on. His eyes were meant for bobcats and deer and sons. Larger prey.

The falcon didn't twitch. In fact, she remained unearthly still even as Elijah unraveled the netting and tied her gingerly within the musty leather bag.

She kept her baleful eye on him all the while, never blinking.

The Wakewood was a misty gray patch of pine and birch that garrisoned the Pennsylvanian countryside for some sixty miles. It had lurked on the outskirts of the old, Slavic-settled town for as long as anyone could remember, a nagging itch that would no doubt one day be noticed and paved over in favor of some parking garage or shopping mall. Yet for now, it remained, ancient as the hills.

Eli had always felt oddly at home here, amongst the snowdrifts and the tall, diamond-barked conifers. If he craned his head back into the falling snowflakes, vertigo would wash over him, and he felt as if he might shoot up into the sky alongside them, fingers sprouting needles, chest filling with sticky sap.

But he never did, and so he followed his father through the forest.

At nineteen years of age, Elijah was the eldest of his siblings. He had dark, curly hair shaved close to his head and dark, clever eyes set beneath heavy brows. His black skin often smelled of antiseptic and Neosporin. Though tall and broad-chested, he had a soft, rumped-in look. His shoulders slumped forward. He studied the ground when he walked, as if the path might be snatched from beneath his feet.

Malcolm Hall was an oak tree in a clerical collar. His lined face was inscrutable behind wire-framed glasses.

The two looked more alike than Elijah would prefer to admit.

The pale gray wash of the sky was seeping down into the horizon. By the time they reached the cabin, the glimpses of sky past the evergreen boughs were a star-studded black and blue. Elijah's hands shook as he tried to fit the key into the lock.

"You trying to convert the thing?" said Malcolm. "Hurry up."

"The lock's frozen."

“It’s *always* frozen.”

“Jude’s usually in charge of the keys.”

“Jude isn’t *here*, Elijah!”

“I know!”

I know.

Eli peeled off his gloves, unveiling bluish fingers. *Finally*—the door swung open. The cabin exhaled a warm breath over them. Yes, it was small, with slapdash wooden boards and naked lightbulbs, but its guts were comfortable—rough-hewn wood, stone fireplace, patchy red velvet armchairs, a gun closet mummified by padlock and chain. This cottage had seen the Hall boys grow up, and, one by one, flicker out.

All except Eli.

Malcolm closed the door behind them. Eli handed him the bags and traps and collapsed into a chair.

Cages loomed on every available surface: dog crates, coops, wire. Sleek-furred shapes paced the shadows, yellow eyes gleaming; feathers ruffled; guttural voices keened. The blood stank like the change jar Eli’s grandfather used to keep in the window of his study. The morning sun would hit it just right, and by lunchtime, the whole room reeked of metal. When Eli was a child, that room, that *scent*, never failed to drag him back here. To the Wakewood. To the cabin. He could never bear crossing the office’s threshold unless the sun had been down for hours.

Malcolm let the traps thud onto the table.

“Grouse... bobcat... beaver...” He began the long task of sorting through their catches of the day, humming with satisfaction. “Look at this haul, Elijah! If Levi could see us now... this is going to be another ’03, I can feel it.”

That coaxed a skittering grin from Eli. “’03? I was, what, six? I couldn’t help at all.”

The reverend offered a sideswept smile, face softening into something that might be affection. He displayed it so rarely that it was difficult to tell. “Ahh, perhaps that’s *why* it was so successful. Isn’t that what those brothers of yours always claimed?”

Eli laughed, tossing his head back. “They had nothing on me! I’m the *reliable* one.”

“Well, you’re not helping now. Busy your idle hands, Mr. Reliable.”

Eli unfolded his lanky frame. In moments like these, when he tried very hard, he could switch on the Elijah that Malcolm had so lovingly cultivated, the Elijah that looked at this table

and saw nothing but antlers and taxidermied heads. He sorted through the game almost mechanically. Raccoons, minks, and foxes went into the dog crates. Birds—

Eli stiffened when his fingers brushed the leather bag. The feathered lump inside was stone-still. His stomach plummeted. *Fuck, fuck.* It'd been so long since he tossed a bag too hard, wound a trap too tight... he teased the twine knot apart.

It happened like a ship breaching fog. The hawk's feathers fluffed out oh-so-slowly, its small shape expanding to something spiked and foreign; it extended its claws—

The world seemed to turn back on again as the bird sank her teeth into Eli's knuckles.

"Fuck!" he screamed.

Malcolm wheeled. "Elijah!"

These weren't dog teeth, weren't rat teeth; no, they were *needle* teeth, serrated and sharp; Eli's skin *ripped* as his father tore the hawk from his body. The reverend flung her across the room, where she hit the wall and then the ground, wings closing shudderingly over her body. Elijah stumbled back, clutching his bloody hand to his chest.

"Teeth!" he cried. "It had—that *bird* had—!"

The reverend seized Eli's wrist, wrenching it away from his body. "Quit spewing profanities."

"Sorry—" Elijah pulled, but his father twisted his arm. "Pa! I said—"

Malcolm yanked Eli so close that all Eli could see was flared nostrils. "You come back with these ideas in your head? Filth in your mouth?!"

Eli tore free. He fell against the table, scrambled for balance. "We're fine, Pa! We are *fine!*"

Anticipating a blow, he focused on his father's hands. Those never lied. They were twitching now, thirsty hands; expectantly, Eli flinched back.

Coward. Weakling—

Shut up, Levi!

And the storm broke. Just like that. Malcolm engulfed him in a warm, strong, forest-scented embrace. *Home.* Eli stiffened, but after a moment... he relaxed into it. Into his father's arms.

"You're my eldest," Malcolm whispered. "The only one that stayed. I know you despised it—shhh... I know. But you're *here*. And you'll be rewarded for it. *My boy.*"

Eli closed his eyes into his father's shoulder.

The only one that stayed.

Jude eloped. Sammy—soft, lovely Sammy—enlisted. Levi took off to California in a van packed with boys and marijuana fumes and legal love. Now it was only Eli. Eli to wipe down the pews, Eli to light the votives, Eli to organize the prayer books on the shelves in that study that still, *still* reeked of pennies and blood. And now the house felt like its organs had been unspooled and discarded, leaving behind a hollow shell; his mother was less than nothing, a ghost with a pulse and a heartbeat, but never a voice. He was alone with Malcolm Hall.

He'd gotten just one semester at the old community college in the city past the Wakewood. Four blessed months beyond the veil. But after that... yes, he'd stayed, as his brothers scattered one by one.

When asked why, he had only one answer:

Someone had to.