

# Prologue

My heart was pounding. It was pounding so hard I was worried he was going to hear it and run. I am sure my dad could hear it. I think I could hear his too. I tried to calm myself down, but just couldn't. My dad tried to calm me down too, but that didn't work either. I had never been so nervous. I had never been so excited.

As I reached down for my rifle, I realized that my hands were shaking so badly I could hardly get my fingers to wrap around it. I was trying to be quiet, but I felt like I was bumping into everything. The sighs from

my dad told me I was bumping into everything. The ground blind was tight for two people, which made it tough to get into a shooting position. I had already blown two chances at deer earlier this morning for that very reason. And I was scared I was about to do it again. Honestly, I was pretty sure I was going to do it again. This time, though, it would hurt worse than before. This buck was huge.

The next few moments were a blur. In one sense, they seemed to be going in slow motion, but they also seemed to be on fast forward. This was the moment I had been waiting for. It was the moment I had been dreaming about for the past couple of years. In fact, it was exactly what I had prayed about as I was falling asleep the night before. But now, as it was happening, I wasn't sure I was going to be able to do it. I wasn't sure that I was going to be able to make the shot. No matter how excited I had been about this

## BIRTHDAY BUCK

hunt yesterday, I wasn't sure I was ready after all. I didn't know it would feel like this. I wasn't prepared. I knew the big buck standing in front of me was further away than my dad would have liked. And because I had already messed up twice, I begged him to take the shot. But Dad refused. He said I'd have to do it. "This is your buck," he whispered. "I've already gotten mine. But you can do this, Jet. I know you can. Just calm down, take a deep breath, and do it like we've been practicing."

I knew the clock was ticking and that this monster buck would soon zero in on us with either his eyes, his ears, or his nose—just like the other two had. And then that would be it. He'd be gone as quickly as they had been. So I slowly lowered my cheek to the stock, lined up the front and rear sights, while following the buck's front leg up to his body—just like Dad had taught me. I placed that front sight right behind his shoulder and

waited for my dad to pull the hammer back, and then for that tap on my shoulder to tell me it was my gun. That was when I noticed that the buck was looking straight at me. I knew he was about to bolt. Thankfully, Dad knew it too. And the hammer was back right when it needed to be. I felt him pat me on the shoulder, both as a sign to shoot and as one last bit of encouragement—which I really needed. I was shaking and I was scared.

I moved my finger to the trigger. I could feel the buck's eyes on me. I could feel Dad's eyes on me too. This was it. It was now or never. And it was up to me. So I slowly began to apply some pressure to the trigger. I held my breath and kept pulling until I heard the rifle break the silence of that cool, January morning. It was my eighth birthday.