

Hush

By Liz Windisch

Erika took her knife and plunged it into the breast of the duck. Felt good, doing that, knowing it was the same duck that had been shitting all over her front drive for the past month. She'd found him waddling around Otter Lake that morning. Most people wouldn't have known which one he was, considering there were upwards of sixty of his kind sittin' and shittin' around the lake. Brown and green and white and quacking up a ruckus. But Erika remembered the ugly growth on his nose – a bulbous, green wart – and knew *exactly which ugly fuck* he was. When she'd taken out her rifle and picked him off, the whole flock had lifted into the air, nearly knocking each other out of the sky in their fright.

“Good riddance,” she muttered, ripping off a chunk of feathers to expose a slab of pink muscle. “Should ‘a left for winter already anyways.”

Her knife moved back and forth, curving along the ribs, cutting away two filets. She placed them neatly on a plate. She plucked up a yellow foot, sheared it off by the ankle and tugged a fleshy drumstick out in a burst of white down. She did the same with the other foot. Satisfied, she threw the duck and its remains into the trash and rinsed the meat under the faucet.

Oil. Salt. Cayenne pepper. She tucked the duck into a casserole dish with some potato wedges and let it bake in the oven. Popping the cap off a beer, she kicked off her boots and ambled over to the living room. She had yet to install any overhead lights, so it was a blind shuffle across the carpet to the easy chair in the corner.

Just as she was about to sit down, the phone rang. “*Paska!*” she swore. “You got ta be kiddin’ me!”

She set her beer down and raced towards the kitchen, picking up the phone.

“Hello?” she panted.

A woman’s voice answered, speaking carefully. Her words were tight. Chosen with care. She could almost hear the other person, standing over her shoulder, saying, “Don’t be too harsh.”

Erika put down the phone.

* * *

The sky was gray. Erika’s eyes were red. She hadn’t slept all night. Soon as the sun came up, she’d made the three-hour drive from Ishpeming to Tapiola. She wanted to leave that night, when they gave her the news, but there was ice on the road. Even in the morning with chains on her tires, it was a dangerous drive.

Kallungi Road was as empty as it always was. Tapiola was still very much a land of lonesome Finnish homesteaders. Not much had changed since their ancestors settled down in the late 1800s and named the town after the Finnish forest spirit, Tapio. While the rest of the country moved on, they stayed behind, tending to their farms in the wild Michigan backcountry.

Spotting the green mailbox she was looking for, Erika turned and guided her truck along the tire tracks that marked the front drive. Towering pine and birch trees lined the shoulders. The grass, which someone had neglected to cut, slapped the front of her car. It took a good five minutes for her to reach the house. She knew from her own experience that it could take up to fifteen to walk by foot, especially in the winter.

Two cop cars were parked out front. A group of green-clad troopers stood over a map spread across the hood of one of the cars. Another man dressed in overalls stood with them,

whom Erika recognized as a neighbor from the next homestead over. Leaving her Rover beside the stump of a dead birch, she walked towards them.

“Officers,” she called out. “What’s goin’ on ‘ere?”

The troopers turned and looked at her. “Report of a missing person, ma’am,” one told her. “Mind introducin’ yourself?”

The neighbor in overalls cleared his throat. She was wracking her brain for his name, but she couldn’t remember. “Dat’s da daughter,” he said. “Da one I told ya about.”

The trooper’s eyes widened. “Ms. Laaksonen then?” he asked.

“That’s my name,” Erika said. “Now can you tell me what ‘appened to my father?”

“He’s missing,” the trooper responded.

“Ya, they told me that on da phone,” Erika said. “He went on a huntin’ trip Tuesday mornin’ and never come back.”

Curse her father and his love of buck. It was bound to get him into trouble at some point. Erika herself only shot what she needed to. A nuisance critter every now and then. Raccoon. Duck. Coyote. Her father, on the other hand, relished the chance to shoot anything with a beating heart. He came out to the old farm every few weeks for a hunting trip. As far as she knew, there had never been an incident until now.

“Stanley Laaksonen, your...brother?” the trooper was saying. “He gave us a call yesterday and said your father was missing. He —”

“What time did he call?” Erika interrupted.

“What?” the trooper asked, confused.

“What *time*?”

The trooper looked to his companions. One of the men produced a clipboard that he flipped through. “Round nine o’clock.”

Erika clenched her jaw. Stan. She would wrap her hands around his throat the next time she saw him.

“Search parties?” she asked.

“There’s one this afternoon with the local search and rescue department. Then another two tomorrow and the next day. They’re finding volunteers.”

“Who’s they?” Erika wanted to know.

“Baraga County Search and Rescue.”

Baraga. They didn’t know shit. “Officers, I don’t know if you’re familiar with MibSAR? Michigan Backcountry Search and Rescue? I’m the head of that operation.”

From within the folds of her jacket, she produced her badge. They all looked at it, sharing glances between each other. She could hear the neighbor whisper, “Told ya.”

“I’ll be searchin’ for my father myself, so I’d appreciate you tellin’ me everythin’ you know.”

* * *

The sun room was warm. Erika peeled back the blanket on her legs and shifted herself in the wicket chair. The sky above her was dark and mottled with a thousand stars. Beside her, a kerosene lamp burned. It was the only light she dared turn on in the room. Otherwise, her view of the backyard would be obscured.

Her eyes remained trained on the patches of snow and grass beyond the window. She’d bought a couple floodlights from the general store down the road and set them up outside, illuminating the tall hedges bordering the yard. If he came back, she would see him.

She glanced at her watch. 23:44.

They had run one search party so far. From three to nine, she and fifty local troopers had slowly marched across the property at an arms-length apart. They'd found nothing. Nothing.

Left. Right. Center. Erika shifted her gaze across the hedges. Her eyelids were drooping. She shook herself awake.

“Can't fuckin' sleep,” she muttered to herself.

She shifted herself to sit more upright. Even from inside, she could hear the crickets chirping. She tapped her foot on the ground once, listening to them. A long time ago, she and her father had sat out here, counting stars, falling asleep to the lullaby the crickets wove into the air. Downstairs, her mother had been baking her pasty pie and chatting to her own mother in Finnish over the phone whilst she worked. But that was a long time ago – when her mother was still alive, and she and her father were still on speaking terms.

If she inhaled, she could almost still smell her mother's pasties baking downstairs. Erika had always been too impatient to learn how to make them. She could skin rabbits and deer and roast them over a fire, but the careful kneading that pasties required eluded her. By the time she wanted to learn, it was too late. Cancer mottled her mother's body, stole her voice, rendered her into a pile of bones. Her mother took her pasty recipe to the grave.

A thump from within the house disturbed the silence. Erika's ears perked. She stood, slowly, grabbing her rifle from where it leaned against the window. Gooseflesh raced across her skin. She walked carefully over the wooden floorboards to the open door. Poking her head inside, she listened. Footsteps. Downstairs.

Someone was in the house.

She stepped into the living room, slinking around the furniture. The stairs were just on the other side of the room. She stood at the railing, keeping to the shadows. The nose of her rifle pointed towards the first floor.

A man stepped into view. He was short, broad-shouldered. She squinted. He was running his hands across the walls, searching for something. She waited until he stepped into the kitchen to descend the stairs. Then she kept her footsteps light and quick. By the time he was crossing the threshold to the foyer, she was a step away. Unfortunately, in her time away from the house, she'd forgotten about that one loose floorboard. Her foot came down on it. *Creak.*

He turned.

She aimed the rifle at his face, shouting, "Put your fuckin' hands up! Don't move!"

Hands flying up, he screamed. It was a long, drawn out squeal – one that Erika would know anywhere. She put the gun down. "Stan, you fuckin' idiot!"

The scream died in his throat. "Erika? That you?" he asked.

She slapped the light switch on the wall. "Ya, you *kusipää*, it's me. What the heck are you doin' here?"

Stan put his hands down. "I came ta look fer Dad," he answered. "What about you? I haven't seen you in a year at least."

Erika put her rifle on the table. "I came here ta shoot buck," Erika said.

"Really?" Stan wondered.

"No, you idiot! I came here for da same reason you did!"

"Ah," Stan said. He stood there awkwardly as Erika set down her rifle and began grumbling to herself, trying to understand why her idiot brother had come all this way. Stan kept

glancing between her and the ridiculous furry red gloves he was wearing, waiting for her to say something.

“I don’t want you comin’ wit me,” Erika said at last, wanting to make sure he understood that now.

“Whaddya mean?” Stan said, his eyebrows twisting together in confusion. “Why not?”

“You’ll slow me down,” Erika responded. “This is my job, Stan. You know that. This is what I do for a living. You, on the other hand, you...” she trailed off.

“You don’t remember?” Stan asked, obviously miffed. “I carve wood!”

Erika made a face. It was no wonder she kept forgetting. Stan and that pansy wood shop of his. “Like I was saying,” Erika continued. “If someone’s going ta find Dad, it’s gonna be me. I don’t need you gettin’ in da way.”

Stan frowned. “I was the one who called the police.”

“On Thursday night,” Erika added. “Late, if you ask me. We’d have a better chance of findin’ him if you called in that morning.”

Stan sniffled. He held up his chin. “Least I knew he was missing in the first place.”

Erika held his gaze for a moment before looking away. She couldn’t argue with that. She stood, grasping her rifle. From the corner of her eye, she watched Stan retreat, glancing worriedly at the gun. Good. He should be afraid of her.

“You can sleep in the living room,” she said. “I’ll be in the sun room. Goodnight, Stan.”

* * *

Matches. Knife. Compass. Erika packed each in her backpack, already bulging with supplies. She planned to set out for the next three days. She had enough food and water to sustain herself, and in that amount of time she was bound to find something.

Zippering up her bag, she straightened. She was standing on the front deck. Looking out, she watched the sun climbing over the trees. That was good. She needed all the daylight she could get.

As she shouldered her pack, the door banged open behind her. She turned to see Stan emerge from the house. On another day, in different circumstance, she might have laughed. Her brother was dressed in so many layers that the straps of his backpack could barely fit over his shoulders.

Erika looked at him. "Explain."

"I'm comin' wit you," he said. "You need me."

"No," Erika said imperatively.

Stan tugged the straps of his backpack. "Then I'll go by myself."

Stepping around Erika, he descended the stairs to the deck and began marching across the grass. He was really going to do it. Erika waited until he reached the tree line before sighing and yelling, "Stop! Stop!"

"You can come," Erika shouted, "but on one condition." Stan turned immediately, listening attentively. "You have to do everything I say."

Stan nodded. "I will!" he called back.

Erika sighed. She would have to pack another bag for him. She told him so, and the two of them walked over to her truck, pulling out another hiking pack and filling it with what he'd need. She told him to ditch half of the peanut butter bars, which he begrudgingly did.

"Who's goin' to watch the house while we're gone?" Erika asked. She hadn't really thought about that until then.

"Mr. Airikainen," Stan answered.

“Who?” Erika wondered.

As if on cue, a truck emerged from the woods. Erika recognized the driver as the neighbor she had seen yesterday.

“Hey, Frank!” Stan greeted, waving at the man. He approached the truck, and the two of them shook hands. “Thank you so much for doing this, we really appreciate it.”

“*Onne sinulle*, to the both of you,” Mr. Airikainen said in response. “I hope ya find him. Russell’s a good man.”

“*Kiitos*,” Stan responded, bowing his head. “I hope we do, too.”

Her brother handed Mr. Airikainen the keys to the house before joining her. Erika helped him shoulder his pack. “You ready?” she asked.

Stan nodded.

* * *

The backcountry was an unforgiving place. She and Stan moved slowly, their eyes roving across the land around them. Every now and then, Stan called out their father’s name. It moved out over the forest, his name did, occasionally urging a few birds to flutter out of the trees, but was otherwise met with silence. Erika’s ears strained after every call, waiting for an answer. She wanted to find him as much as Stan did.

Where are you, Dad? She thought.

She held her GPS in one hand and a map in the other. She’d marked the areas she and the SAR team had covered yesterday in red sharpie. She and Stan were skirting the outer lip of the first quarter of the search zone. The family homestead was about four acres, but that didn’t include the township, which the whole city shared as hunting grounds. All in all, it was about twenty square miles.

She exhaled slowly, watching her breath fog up in front of her. It was twenty degrees out. That was as warm as it was going to get – if you considered that warm. A thin layer of snow was on the ground. More snow was in the forecast for the upcoming week. Erika looked at Stan shivering in front of her. He was wearing a floppy hat made of rabbit fur.

“Sara made it for me,” he’d said.

She had also made the pair of red gloves he was wearing, which Erika had repeatedly told him were not thick enough to keep his hands warm. “You’ll get frostbite,” she’d warned him. It didn’t matter. He insisted on wearing them.

The hours dragged on. She and Stan stood ten feet apart. She marched diagonally across the snow in one direction, scanning left, scanning right. Stan marched in the other. Her movements were slow and calculated. His were loud and uncoordinated. In the middle, they crisscrossed paths. Behind them was left an endless chain of interconnecting Xs.

The wind whispered through the boughs of the trees. It tickled her cheeks. Lifted stray wisps of her hair and made them dance in thin air. When she was younger, her father told her that the wind was the sound of the forest gods Tapio and Mielikki whispering to each other.

“You can’t see ‘em, but they’re there, Erika,” he said.

He knelt down so that he was eye level with her. He set his rifle down and gestured upwards, towards the veil of green over their heads. “You’re never alone out here.” He tapped her temple. “Remember dat.”

She paused beside a tree and felt the rough trunk beneath her fingertips. Closing her eyes, she listened for the beat of its wooden heart. A branch cracked above her, shattering the silence. She looked up, locking eyes with a squirrel that was perched in its branches. It waved its gray tail at her, nose twitching.

Her father was right. Even in the dead of winter, you were never alone out here.

Slowly, Erika removed her rifle from where it was attached to her bag. She kept her eyes trained on the squirrel as she slipped a bullet into the barrel and raised the muzzle. The squirrel watched her, blind to the danger he was in.

“Steady,” she heard her father say. “Steady.”

She felt his hand on her elbow, urging the muzzle a little to the right. “He’s gonna jump when you fire. Gotta account for dat.” He leaned away. “Now *breathe*.”

Exhaling, Erika pulled the trigger. The bullet sliced through the air. The squirrel dropped. Stan, up ahead, screamed like he was the one who’d been shot.

“What the hell?!” he cried, covering his ears. “What did you do that for?”

Erika knelt down and grabbed the squirrel. She took a bit of twine from her bag and made a noose around the animal’s neck. “Dinner,” she said to Stan. “You want ta eat, doncha?”

Stan made a retching noise and turned around, holding his hand to his mouth. Erika shook her head and attached the squirrel to her pack. She stood, wiping the blood from her hands on her snow pants.

From her back pocket, she pulled out her GPS. They had just breached the SAR zone. No one had searched this area yet. She took a moment to scan her surroundings. As far as she could see, there was nothing. She frowned. Normally, she would have found something by now. A footprint. A pattern of shattered branches. A scrap of clothing.

She looked at Stan, who was still walking. His eyes were trained on the ground. He really wanted to find him.

Search and Rescue was slow work. Erika had been doing it for a long time, so she knew. After returning from Iraq, she'd decided to start her own search and rescue team. If she could find people in a war zone, she figured she could find them in the backcountry.

She spent a year sharpening the skills she already had. The ones her father had taught her out here. Shooting. Hunting. Survival. Then she was off, alone, trekking into the backcountry to find those nature had swept away. It was solitary work. Work that required dedication and skill. Work that could consume you.

It suited Erika well.

Lifting her chin, she glanced at the sun creeping slowly towards the horizon. They only had a few hours left until sunset. It was best to keep moving. She pocketed her GPS and moved on, stepping over the bloody patch in the snow.

* * *

When the sun disappeared and darkness descended, she told Stan it was time to set up camp. She found a ridge where they would be somewhat sheltered from the wind and unshouldered her pack. Together, they raised the tent Erika had brought along. It took them more than a few tries. Stan, unsurprisingly, had not set up a tent in a long time.

“Last time I went camping was when we were kids,” he said. “And you know how much I hated that.”

Erika nodded. She knew. Soon as he got into high school, Stan had refused to come on any more camping trips. After that, she and her father had gone on out on their own. Out in the wilderness, where it was just the two of them, the wind, and the trees, she learned a lot about her father. Learned that she was practically a mirror of him in terms of personality.

That was probably why they hadn't gotten along the past few years. They were too similar. Stubborn against stubborn didn't make a good combination.

When her mother had been alive, she had softened their rough edges with her patience and understanding. If Erika and her father returned empty-handed after a long day, ready to kill each other, they were greeted by a table with warm pasties and other Finnish dishes. Her mother would smile that secret smile of hers as a couple beers turned her father's cheeks pink. Erika, with blueberry pie in hand, would stifle a laugh at the jokes Stan told.

Her mother was the knot keeping the quilt of her family together. Her death left that quilt unraveling, Erika and her father two strands splitting apart, Stan at the wayside, lost and confusing, trying to understand why his father and sister had turned on each other.

When the tent was up, Erika showed Stan how to start a fire. "Watch," she said.

She took a block of magnesium and began scraping it with a knife. Tiny silver flakes fell onto the pile of twigs and bark she had gathered. Turning the block over, she began rasping the blade across the silver rod on the other side. At last, a spark. Erika kindled the flame until it blossomed into a healthy fire. Smoke twirled into the air between them.

Stan shook his head. "You were always so good at this stuff. Dad tried to teach me but --" He lifted his shoulders, let them drop. "I was never any good at it."

Erika looked at him. She removed the dead squirrel from her pack and held it out to him, along with the knife she had used to start the fire. "Wanna try?" she offered.

Stan shook his head.

Erika set the squirrel in front of her and began skinning it. "You were good at other things," she said. "Making us laugh. No one could make Dad laugh like you."

Stan smiled, faintly. "That's true," he agreed.

The smile faded slowly from his lips. “Do you think we’ll find him?” Stan asked.

Her knife froze. She glanced up at him. “Of course,” Erika said.

Stan looked at her, nodded.

She finished skinning the squirrel, then tied it to a branch and roasted it over the fire.

They ate it along with some of the bread and cheese Erika had packed. When they were full, Erika choked the flames and the two of them crawled into their sleeping bags in the tent.

“You really couldn’t leave the fire?” Stan wondered, teeth chattering.

She pulled her blanket tighter. The temperature was plummeting. There was something about the way it got to you out here – the cold. It moved inside of you. Made you shiver from the inside out.

“Couldn’t leave the fire burning,” Erika said. “Might attract bears. Or wolves.”

“Bears? Wolves?” Stan repeated.

Erika looked at him, shaking in his sleeping bag. Turning over, she reached out towards the corner of the tent and pulled something out of her pack.

“Here,” she said to Stan, handing it to him.

He took it, turning the metal over in his hands. “What is it?”

“A pistol,” Erika said.

Stan put it beside him, swallowing thickly. “Thanks,” he said.

She listened to his breathing slow. For a while, she lay there in the darkness. She was thinking about what Stan had asked.

Do you think we’ll find him?

There was something she hadn't told Stan about her job, something she didn't tell most people about her job. That most of the time, by the time she found people, they were already dead. Her job was essentially hauling lifeless bodies on her sled.

Their faces haunted her. All of them frozen in fear from that moment the wilderness had claimed them.

Erika looked at Stan, sleeping peacefully. She wondered if she should tell him. Tell him that she was already losing hope. She tightened her jaw. For now, she'd stay silent.

* * *

Three days. Three days and they hadn't found anything. She and Stan were heading back to the house. Snow was imminent on the horizon – a blizzard, by the looks of it. They'd covered the entire area, and yet they hadn't found a thing. She'd radioed the other search parties. Each day they, too, went out, searching. Twice she and Stan came across them, but they were also empty-handed.

"I don't understand," Stan said, his steps heavy. "Why haven't we found him?"

Erika was quiet. She didn't know herself. She still hadn't even found any footprints, not one, not even in the thickest cover of the woods, where the branches should have kept away the newly-fallen snow.

Even if he'd been wearing snow shoes, there would be tracks. She wracked her brain for images of her father when they went hunting. The neighbor who saw him at the general store before he went hunting said he was wearing an orange hunting vest over his usual camo pants and jacket. If Erika remembered one thing about her father, it was that he was always prepared. If he went out for a day, he brought a bag full of supplies. If he went out for more than that, he

brought a sled of supplies with him. She'd searched for the sled in the garage. It wasn't there – meaning he had brought it with him.

But even then, there were no sled tracks.

She'd found one thing. A dead deer. She'd knelt beside it, touching its muzzle. It was still warm. A fresh kill. She'd looked at the stomach of it, mauled open, intestines strewn across the snow. Bloody footprints trailed off into the brush. She'd looked at Stan, shaking in his boots.

“*Susia*,” she had said.

“Wolves?” he'd repeated.

She'd nodded. Held a finger to her lips and listened. The only howling she heard was that of the wind, announcing the arrival of the blizzard. She stood.

“They're *villi*,” she'd told Stan. “Hunting for the thrill of it.”

Stan had gulped.

Erika let the memory of the dead deer fall from her mind. Up ahead, she spotted the house. “Come on, Stan,” she said, urging him forward. “We need to get inside before this thing hits.”

She walked past him, quickening her steps. At last, she reached the stairs to the deck. She ascended them, her feet heavy, the pack on her shoulders weighing her down. When she reached the door, she paused, realizing Stan wasn't behind her. She turned, walking towards the railing. She looked out. Her brother was standing at the edge of the forest with his back to her.

He'd turned out to be hardier than she thought. He still hated camping, that was clear, but never did he ask her to stop and take a break. At night, he didn't even want to stop looking. Sure, he still shied away every time she shot a squirrel or a rabbit for them to eat. Not once had he used the pistol she gave him, though he clung to it at night when the howling of wolves filled the

darkness. He was still Stan, still her little brother who cried every time she and her father came back from a hunting trip. And, knowing him this way, she could see in his eyes that this was breaking him.

“Stan!” she called out. “What’re you doin’?”

Her brother turned. Looked at her through the flurries that had begun drifting from the sky. “We can’t leave him out there!” he shouted.

Erika sucked in a breath. Her eyes followed the line of dark clouds on the horizon. “It’s a blizzard, Stan!” she said.

“I know!” Stan called out. Then, more softly, “I know.”

She watched his gaze fall to the ground. She knew what he was thinking about. The same thing she was thinking about. Their father, out there in the cold, all alone. Calling for help. Hungry. Cold. Hurting.

She sighed, closing her eyes and willing her tears not to roll down her cheeks. She walked back down the stairs, crossed the yard towards her brother.

“I don’t know where he went, Stan,” she said, honestly. “I just don’t know.”

Stan looked at her, his gaze hard. He was silent for a few moments. “He told me he was going hunting,” he said. “He wouldn’t lie, would he? Why would he lie?”

Erika shook her head. “He’s a terrible liar. He tells you half-truths that you have to figure out on your own.” When he took her mother off life support, he told Erika she had passed naturally. And sure, if the tubes were removed, her mother’s body could not sustain itself on its own. Erika looked at her brother. “What exactly did he tell you, Stan? Besides he was going hunting?”

Stan pursed his lips. A frown appeared between his brows. “He said he was going the usual route by the river.”

“By the *river*?” Erika repeated. “You said stream before, Stan.”

“Stream. River. Does it matter? We passed a river a few hours ago, didn’t we?”

“That was a *stream*, Stan. There’s a difference.” She fastened the clasps of her backpack across her chest, realization dawning on her. “He didn’t go the usual route.”

Stan frowned. “Where else would he go?”

Erika’s gaze moved over her his head. He turned. “The reserve?” he wondered. “But that’s off limits.”

“That wouldn’t stop Dad from going there,” she answered.

The other side of Kallungi Road belonged to the state. It was strictly off-limits to hunters. But knowing their father, he might very well go there. He had a tendency to go where he wasn’t supposed to. It was something Erika recognized – because she herself did it, too.

Erika looked up at the blizzard closing in on them. If they went, they would go now. Head into the preserve and try to find shelter. Once the first snow fell, they could continue on, search between storms.

She looked at her brother. “Let’s go.”

* * *

The snow was coming down hard. She and Stan had put on their snow shoes, but even then, the snow drifts on this side of the road were deeper. She moved faster, urged Stan to do the same. They needed to find shelter.

Up ahead, she spotted something gray. A rock. She squinted, seeing the outcropping of rock poking from the edge of a hill. “There,” she said to Stan, pointing so he could see.

He nodded and they took off towards the outcropping. They were nearly at it when Erika heard it. A growl, soft and quiet. So quiet that if your ears were trained as Erika's were to detect it, you wouldn't have heard it. Erika halted, knowing what it meant. But not Stan. He had already taken a few more steps before Erika had a chance to warn him.

“Stan!” she said. “Stop!”

But it was too late – the first wolf was already out of the den. Erika watched two rows of sharp teeth sail through the air. Stan stood still, frozen with fear. She reached for her rifle as she ran forward, putting herself between Stan and the wolf. Unfortunately, the snow in front of them was deeper than she'd anticipated. Her right leg went in to the knee, throwing her shot wildly off its target.

The wolf seized her other leg. She felt its jaw close around her calf, tearing through muscle and knocking against bone. She screamed.

“Run, Stan!” she yelled. She knocked the butt of her gun against the head of the wolf. It let go after a moment, backing off, still snapping at her. She scrambled backwards, trying to put space between herself and the beast. When she was back far enough, she raised her gun again. Her fingers fumbled to take another bullet from her pocket and reload. The wolf was sticking its head forward, snapping at her toes.

She put the bullet in and fired. The wolf howled, a shrill sound of pain, and crumpled to the ground. Erika sagged back, thinking the danger was gone. And then, from her right, a terrible growl sounded. She stood up, watching as another wolf sprinted towards her. She reached into her pocket. No more bullets. She feebly held her gun out, hoping it would scare it off, hoping she wouldn't die here –

BANG!

She looked up, saw Stan holding a gun. She'd given him the pistol to use, in case they ran into trouble, but she never thought he'd fire it. While the bullet had failed to hit its mark, the sound of the gun going off had scared the wolf back. Erika shouted at Stan to give her the gun. She aimed and shot the animal through the head as it barreled towards her again. Stan looked down at her, tears leaking from the corners of his eyes as Erika's blood stained the snow beneath her red.

"You alright?" he asked.

She swallowed thickly. "Yeah."

* * *

Erika watched her brother's face behind the flames of the fire. Her back was against the rock. It wasn't just an outcropping the wolves had found, but a cave. Her leg was wrapped in bandages. Stan had made a splint for her – his wood carving skills put to work. He hadn't said much since the wolves. He was beginning to understand, Erika realized. Understand how dangerous it was out here. And understanding that was making him lose hope.

Erika watched him. This wasn't her brother, this somber person sitting across from her. Her brother was the goofball who laughed. Who made jokes at Christmas dinner. She couldn't bear to see him this way.

"I bet he was fighting a bear," Erika said. "That's why we can't find him."

She looked at Stan, waiting to see if he'd take the bait.

"Or he found a bunch of buck, a whole herd, and he shot them all down. He's made a tent somewhere out of deerskin, and he's smoking a pipe. You know how he always told us he wanted to try weed."

Her brother snorted. It was working.

“Maybe he came across an Ojibwa camp,” Erika continued. “I ‘eard there’s some out there. He fell in love with an Indian woman, and they’re drinking some magic tribal juice together.”

“More like moonshine,” her brother said. A small smile tweaked his lips. “Dad’s been drinking a lot of moonshine lately.”

“Really?” Erika said, surprised. “He always said he hated dat stuff.”

Stan nodded. “Yeah, he changed a lot in the last few years. I wish you’d been here with him. He missed you.” He paused. “He never told me why you two stopped talking.”

Erika averted her eyes. “It was because of mom,” she said, quietly. “I wanted to keep her on life support. He didn’t. And he just – it didn’t seem like it was affecting him, Stan.”

Stan nodded, understanding. They sat in silence for a bit. “He cared,” he said, suddenly. “You know that saying...*Suu valehtelee, silmät puhuvat totta?*”

The mouth lies, but the eyes tell the truth.

“He didn’t say much about it, but he was hurting,” Stan went on. “I could tell.”

“I didn’t know,” Erika said.

* * *

In the morning, all was still. Erika told Stan to walk as far as he could without either of them losing sight of one another. They trudged silently across the powder in their snow shoes, Erika walking somewhat awkwardly in her splint. She could tell that morning that something was different. She wasn’t sure what, but she could feel it. Feel it deep inside her.

They walked across open fields of endless white. Beneath fir trees shrouded in snow. Around a grove of birch trees, whose white and black trunks made it look like all color had been

sucked from the world. Over a frozen stream mottled with round stones. Not a single animal crossed their path. Not even a bird fluttering overhead.

At the bank of the river, she stopped to break the ice with her boot and crouch down, lifting a bit of water to her lips. As she stood, she felt her heart stop in her chest. Up ahead, she saw it, the only color amongst the white: her father's orange hunting hat. She felt like she couldn't breathe.

She looked downriver, at Stan, scouting the riverbank. "Stan," she said. "Wait here."

He turned to look at her. The expression on her face must have betrayed her thoughts because he took a step towards her. But when she shook her head, he stopped.

He nodded to tell her he understood. She looked back at the hat. Heart beating in her chest, she waded through the river towards it. The ice-cold water invaded her hiking boots, seeped into the bandage covering her leg. She stumbled up the opposite bank and trudged on. Not twenty feet out, she found the sled.

"Oh, God," she murmured, quickening her pace.

She looked around, wildly, left and right. She stumbled through a snow drift. Pain blossomed in her injured leg, but she ignored it. There. She saw the familiar camo print. Her chest was constricting. She couldn't breathe. Slowly, she rounded the thicket of trees obscuring him from her.

He was buried to his navel in snow.

He was sitting there, and if it weren't for the mound of snow on his legs, it would seem he had just stopped to rest. But he hadn't. He hadn't.

She touched his cold hand, his fingers purple from frostbite. Trembled at the sight of his eyes, blue and bright and open. And the tears, frozen like icicles on his cheeks.

“No,” she said once. Then, “No. No. No.” She kept repeating it. Kept saying it, as if her chanting no would bring him back, would thaw his frozen veins and he’d open his eyes and say, “Well, hello, daughter, haven’t seen you in a while” the way he used to.

* * *

Inspired by true events.