

## A Second Chance

He rested the heavy barreled rifle on his shoulder and centered his target in the frame of the gunsight. His eye roamed for an instant through the sight and down the sleek extension. Each muscle was tense and every movement deliberate as he slowly cocked the rifle. Click, click, click cracked into the silence. A bead of sweat formed on his hairline and made its way down the side of his face. He placed his hand on the trigger and began the ritual count to ten before releasing the deadly sting. One, two, three, four . . . his eyes shone in anticipation. Five, six, seven . . . he held his breath. Eight, nine.

"Mason Wainright! What in the world are you trying to do?!?"

"Damn you!" he said, throwing down the rifle.

"You were aiming that thing right at your Uncle Peter's tiffany lamp!"

"I was just practicin'!"

"And what if you jerk by mistake and hit the trigger? Well, I'll tell you what! It'd be 'tiffany' all over your Uncle Peter's living room! Then you'd be in a sorry state, I can guarantee you that!"

"And what would you do, Mama? Huh?"

"Why . . . I'd . . . I'd be very embarrassed. Yes, I would be . . . *extremely* embarrassed!"

Mason turned away with a half smirk creased into his pumpkin cheeks and began to survey the surface of his rifle. His concentration was entirely devoted to his "piece," as he called it, except for the occasional brusque pushing of his unkempt hair away from his eyes. His round features were exaggerated unnecessarily by the khaki safari outfit he sported. It had been a gift from his mother on his eleventh birthday two months ago, and he wore it continually, calling it his "hunter's apparel."

"Is your Uncle Peter up yet?" said his mother's voice, its wistfulness skimming the air.

"Who cares?" said Mason, tightening a loose screw in the barrel.

"That's not a very nice way to talk about your dear Uncle Peter. After all, if it weren't for him, we wouldn't have been able to spend these glorious weeks on his ranch—which, don't forget, will be yours someday when Uncle Peter is gone."

"I *expect* it to be!" said Mason, glaring into his mother's eyes that were as clear as glass. "I have the only right to it!"

"That you do!" said Uncle Peter's deep baritone. Uncle Peter strode down the wooden stairs from his bedroom. There was no need for him to be filled in about the conversation. He knew with Mason it was one of three things: guns, food, or his "rights."

Uncle Peter's lean figure stopped at the bottom of the stairs as he rested his hand across the banister. His fingers were slim like a pianist's. He hadn't combed his sandy hair or shaved that morning. He was dressed in his "ranch uniform" complete with red Talbott flannel shirt and olive green slacks with matching jacket.

Sinking his hand deep into his jacket pocket, Uncle Peter pulled out a thin cigarette, then moved toward the unlit fireplace and pursed his lips. "Someone should have started the log this morning." He brought out a long fireplace match and, with a quick flick across the fireside brick, struck it to flame, lit his cigarette with the match, then placed the flame into the bed of brush where the log rested.

Mason's mother smiled as the glow from the fire danced across her face.

Mason turned away and continued the inspection of his rifle.

"Peter," said the Mother, "I've got a sack of garbage out there from last night's dinner that's calling to be taken to the dump."

"Don't say another word," said Uncle Peter. "I'm on my way!"

Mason's mother let a sigh escape her lips as she crossed

back into the kitchen. Uncle Peter moved to the coat rack and donned his World War II fighter jacket. Outside, the air was cutting cold. Mason found interest in the roaring flames that licked the sides of the hearth with a raging vengeance. He collected a ball of saliva in his mouth and fervently spat a direct aim toward the largest flame.

"You'll need more spit than that to put it out," said Uncle Peter zipping up his jacket.

"I don't want to put it out!" said Mason, turning to his Uncle with a glare. "I want it to burn, higher and higher. I want to watch it crack the log in half and disintergrate it to flecks of black. I want the flames to leap out into the room until the whole room is engulfed with fire!"

Uncle Peter stood silently for a moment, raising his jacket collar to his neck. "Well," he said, "At least you'll have something to do today."

Mason's fierce stare softened for a second but returned as Uncle Peter opened the front door and started to leave. "You passing the meadow on the way to the dump?"

"I might be," said his Uncle.

"You can drop me there," Mason said, snatching his gun and jacket. "I'm gonna pick me off some squirrels!"

The drive to the dump was a half mile's distance down the road past the last creek. The meadow lay stretched between the ranch house and the dump. They sat in silence during their drive until Uncle Peter passed the meadow without stopping.

"Hey, stop!" yelled Mason. "You passed it up!"

"There's another clearing just as good by the dump," said Uncle Peter, shifting the aged gears in his '52 jeep.

Mason sat befuddled. He wanted to speak out defiantly but chose not to. Uncle Peter was a man of few words but what words he did speak were important and not be argued with by boys such as Mason Wainright—even if he was a nephew.

Uncle Peter turned to Mason and eyed his gun. He turned his attention back to the road. "When did you get that gun?"

"I forget."

"You forget?"

"Christmas."

"Which one?"

Mason turned angrily toward his Uncle and remained silent.

"Which one?" his Uncle repeated.

Mason turned his eyes back to the road. He spoke slowly and quietly with a voice filled with anger. "The one before he died."

"I thought so!" said his uncle, turning the jeep toward the dump. The dump road was etched with deep furrows, long and jagged, that sent the jeep up and down and side to side. His uncle seemed to ride with the bumps as a horseman rides a galloping horse. Mason, however, held tightly to the side of the jeep. "Ever heard the old saying, 'You never get a second chance to make a good first impression?'"

"Never!" said Mason, holding on tighter.

"It's a good saying to keep in mind. Do it right the first time, or don't do it at all!" said his Uncle. He pulled to a jolting halt.

Mason's back slapped the back of the seat. He sat, collecting his wits as if he'd just finished a high speed roller coaster ride. Uncle Peter had taken the huge sack of garbage and dumped it in a large crevasse built for that purpose.

Slowly, Mason slipped out of the jeep, clutching his rifle tightly. He sauntered around the jeep and waded through the thick, dry brush. The ground was cold and cracked. The snow would soon fall and each crack would be filled to overflowing with the soft white powder.

Uncle Peter was dumping the last remnants of the debris into the deep hole when Mason spotted a grey and white flecked rabbit darting across the low brush that lay several yards in front of him.

From all the squirrel hunting he'd done, he knew to lie low and walk softly. He'd shot a fair share of tree squirrels in his eleven years. Sometimes he didn't kill them right off and had to pump a few more slugs into them to finish them. The bodies got pretty torn apart but that was alright. He'd never had the chance to shoot a rabbit, and his imagination relished the thought. If only he could mesmerize the creature as he'd

seen done on television—that way he'd be able to get right up to it and nail it clean through the head.

The light touch of a hand dropped on his shoulder and he jumped a bit. It was Uncle Peter who now had spotted the innocent prey. The rabbit had stopped to munch on a patch of green grass.

"You gonna go for him, Mason?"

"Damn right, I am!" he said, opening the chamber and making sure the gun was loaded. "*Damn!* I didn't load any bullets. Oh God . . ."

Uncle Peter's hand slowly came forward, holding a box of bullets. Mason looked at him. Then he grabbed the box and began to empty the shiny pellets into his palm.

"You only get one," said Uncle Peter.

"You got *plenty* here!" said Mason.

"You only get one."

"I might not plug him with one!"

"You better."

"But what if I . . .?"

"He's moving," said Uncle Peter as he watched the rabbit hop forward a bit. "If you want him, you better do it now."

Mason turned to face the rabbit and in his mind measured the distance between them. Regaining his command of the situation, he emptied all the bullets back into the box, except one. He clicked the chamber open and let the lone slug slide in. He clicked the arm shut, then raised the gun toward the white and grey target.

Uncle Peter stepped back.

Mason framed the prey into his gunsight, tilting the long barrel downward a bit. He cocked the rifle slowly, letting the click blend with the rustling of the wind. He began his slow count. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight . . .

Suddenly the rabbit darted forward and Mason pressed the trigger.

He lowered the gun and stared for a moment.

Uncle Peter stepped forward and eyed the rabbit. It didn't move.

Mason smiled wildly. "I got it clean! What a shot!" he said. He looked at Uncle Peter who kept his eye fixed on the rabbit.

His Uncle's face was without expression. "Well, aren't you gonna contratulate me?" said Mason.

"Not until you kill it," said Uncle Peter.

"But it's—" Mason started to say "dead" when he saw the rabbit rising on one side.

"*Damn!*" he said. "I was sure I nailed it!" He looked at his Uncle. "Well, come on! Give me another bullet!"

Mason opened the chamber of his gun and motioned to his uncle to hand him another bullet.

"I told you you only get one shot," said his uncle.

"Well then, how do you expect me to kill it?"

"You'll have to break its neck." His uncle turned to walk back toward the jeep.

"Are you crazy?" Mason was wide-eyed as he followed close behind.

"Hurry up! Your mother will have breakfast waiting for us and I don't want to be late."

"Give me another bullet, dammit! I'm not breaking its neck!" Mason crossed to where his uncle was brushing dry leaves from the back of the jeep. "Give me another bullet!"

Uncle Peter turned toward the boy looking up at him. They stared at each other for a long minute.

Mason swallowed hard and gritted his teeth. "Give me another bullet!"

His uncle turned away.

Mason groped in his uncle's jacket pocket for the box of twenty-twos.

Uncle Peter grabbed Mason's hand to pull it out of his pocket. They struggled for a moment.

"Give them to me!" Mason said over and over as his eyes became wild with anger. "Give them to—"

Uncle Peter cuffed him across the face.

Mason released his hand and stood in shock. No one had ever dared touch him in anger. Not his mother—not even his... he looked at his uncle as if to beg once more for just *one* more bullet. Uncle Peter's face remained unchanged.

Mason pressed his lips together tightly and turned to the rabbit. He walked slowly toward the animal, hoping his uncle would make a move or a sound that would end this torture.

Uncle Peter did not move.

Mason held his breath, then let it out as he reached the dying rabbit. The creature was panting, its eyes wide and fixed on a blade of grass. A small red spot behind the rabbit's right ear marked where the bullet had hit. The fur surrounding the spot was damp with blood. Mason turned away, letting out short breaths repeatedly. He tilted his head backward so the tears would dissolve back into his eyes. He could hear Uncle Peter arranging his equipment in the back of the jeep and felt better to know he didn't have an audience. Mason returned his glance to the rabbit whose panting had subsided considerably. "Maybe he'll die on his own," Mason hoped.

Kneeling down, Mason lowered his finger to the rabbit's ear and gently stroked it. The rabbit's glass-clear eyes tilted toward Mason who found himself mesmerized with their gaze. Those gentle eyes. Mason shivered.

Now, the rabbit's eyes tilted toward the blade of grass once again as if to say, "Do it and do it fast."

Mason took the rabbit's head between his thick palms. The warmth was fading fast from the rabbit's body. "Do it and do it fast," he told himself. He closed his eyes tightly, as if anticipating a blow and whispered, "I didn't mean it. I never did."

With that, he jerked the head backward. One muffled pop and the rabbit lay at rest. Mason opened his eyes and withdrew his trembling hands. He lay his palms on a moist patch of grass, hoping the sick feeling would soak into the ground with the rabbit's blood. He wiped his face with his sleeve and stood up, exhausted and dazed.

The glands in his mouth filled with saliva. He feared he would vomit and swallowed hard to force it back. Mason turned to his Uncle who was now sitting in the jeep, rolling his finger across a cigarette butt. He moved to his uncle's side, paused, then spoke quietly, for fear of breaking into sobs.

"I did it," he said.

"That's good," his uncle said.

Mason looked Uncle Peter in the eye, the sadness washing through him. "I didn't like it."

"That's even better," said Uncle Peter.

