

42 Sundown at Coffin

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The old man walked slowly through the dry, fallen leaves of autumn, his practiced eye automatically choosing the bare and stony places in the trail for his feet. There was scarcely a sound as he passed, though his left knee was stiff with scar tissue. He grunted occasionally as the tight sinews pulled.

Damn chainsaw, he thought.

Behind him, the boy shuffled along, trying to imitate his grandfather, but unable to mimic the silent motion that the old man had learned during countless winter days upon this wooded mountain in pursuit of game. *He's 15 years old, the old man thought, plenty old enough to be learning...*, but that was another time, another America. His mind drifted, and he saw himself, a 15-year-old boy following in the footsteps of his own grandfather, clutching a 12 gauge in his trembling hands as they tracked a wounded whitetail.

The leg was hurting worse now, and he slowed his pace a bit. Plenty of time. *It should have been my own son here with me now, the old man thought sadly. But Jason had no interest, no understanding. He cared for nothing but pounding on the keys of that damned computer terminal. He knew nothing about the woods, or where food came from...or freedom. And that's my fault, isn't it?*

The old man stopped and held up his hand, motioning for the boy to look. In the small clearing ahead, the deer stood motionless, watching them. It was a scraggly buck, underfed and sickly, but the boy's eyes lit up with excitement. It had been many years since they had seen even a single whitetail here on the mountain. After the hunting had stopped, the population had exploded. The deer had eaten the mountain almost bare until erosion had become a serious problem in some places. That following winter, three starving does had wandered into the old man's yard, trying to eat the bark off of his pecan trees, and he had wished the "animal rights" fanatics could have been there then. It was against the law, but old man knew a higher law, and he took an axe into the yard and killed the starving beasts. They did not have the strength to run.

The buck finally turned and loped away, and they continued down the trail to the river. When they came to the "Big Oak," the old man turned and pushed through the heavy brush beside the trail and the boy followed, wordlessly. The old man knew that Thomas was curious about their leaving the trail, but the boy had learned to move silently (well, almost) and that meant no talking. When they

came to "Coffin Rock," the old man sat down upon it and motioned for the boy to join him.

"You see this rock, shaped like a casket?" the old man asked. "Yes sir." The old man smiled. The boy was respectful and polite. He loved the outdoors, too. Everything a man could ask in a grandson...or a son.

"I want you to remember this place, and what I'm about to tell you. A lot of it isn't going to make any sense to you, but it's important and one day you'll understand it well enough. The old man paused. Now that he was here, he didn't really know where to start.

"Before you were born," he began at last, "this country was different. I've told you about hunting, about how everybody who obeyed the law could own guns. A man could speak out, anywhere, without worrying about whether he'd get back home or not. School was different, too. A man could

send his kids to a church school, or a private school, or even teach them at home. But even in the public schools, they didn't spend all their time trying to brainwash you like they do at yours now." The old man paused, and was silent for many minutes. The boy was still, watching a chipmunk scavenging beside a fallen tree below them.

"Things don't ever happen all at once, boy. They just sort of sneak up on you. Sure, we knew guns were important; we just didn't think it would ever happen in America. But we had to do something about crime, they said. It was a crisis. Everything was a crisis! It

was a drug crisis, or a terrorism crisis, or street crime, or gang crime. Even a 'health care' crisis was an excuse to take away a little more of our rights." The old man turned to look at his grandson.

"They ever let you read a thing called the Constitution down there at your school?" The boy solemnly shook his head. "Well, the Fourth Amendment's still in there. It says there won't be any unreasonable searches and seizures. It says you're safe in your own home." The old man shrugged. "That had to go. It was a crisis! They could kick your door open any time, day or night, and come in with guns blazing if they thought you had drugs...or later, guns. Oh, at first it was just registration - to keep the guns out of the hands of criminals! But that didn't work, of course, and then later when they wanted to take 'em they knew where to look. They banned "assault rifles" and then "sniper rifles" and "Saturday-night-specials." Everything you saw on the TV or in the movies was against us. God knows the news people were! And the schools were teaching our kids that nobody

