

The Hunt

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Natchez, Mississippi

Chapter 1

The Brigade

“You’re full of it,” said Patrick McDaniel to his younger brother, Joseph.

“In your dreams,” Joseph snapped back.

Usually best friends, football teammates, video game partners, and hunting buddies, Patrick McDaniel, 14, and his younger brother, Joseph McDaniel, 13, disagreed to the point of war on one subject: hunting.

When the conversation at the McDaniel household turned to deer hunting, the tension rose like the mercury in a thermostat on a sizzling Natchez, Mississippi, day.

Patrick had killed his first deer - a doe - at age 9; Joseph bagged his first buck at age 8 1/2. Patrick’s weighed 118 pounds; Joseph’s weighed 132. Patrick had more kills - nine - but Joseph’s eight had more total weight and more points.

Their parents, Pat and Deb McDaniel, watched this competitiveness with amusement. But the boys ... well ... they sometimes didn’t talk to one another for hours after a hunt in which one upstaged the other.

So there they were at their lockers at St. Mary School, each bragging about an upcoming hunt ... not just any hunt ... but a chance to bag a 250-pound, 12-point buck. Joseph had been needling Patrick for days that he was going to take down the buck. And Patrick was getting mighty sick of his brother’s bragging.

“Listen, Josephina (the name Patrick gave Joseph when he was *really* angry), just shut up about the buck; it’s mine!”

“Buck? What buck?” asked Taylor Bartley, 14, their friend and avid hunter.

“A buck? Who shot a buck?” asked Braxton Foster, 12, another friend and hunter.

“Now see what you’ve done?” Patrick barked at Joseph. “We’ve got a committee all wanting to know about the buck.”

Often, Patrick, Joseph, Taylor and Braxton would go on hunts together with their dads. They called themselves the Buck Brigade, and Patrick was their unofficial “commander.”

At five feet, six inches, 145 pounds, Patrick was the biggest of the brigade. Patrick liked his hair cut short, way short. He was the captain and quarterback of the middle school football team, and center on the basketball team. Patrick was the most intense of them all.

Joseph was five feet, two inches, and weighed close to 100 pounds. He liked his hair long - “something to comb” - and his relaxed personality often masked his intensely competitive nature.

They were like the “good cop” and “bad cop.” Patrick was the “tough guy;” Joseph was the “nice guy.”

Patrick was in eighth grade; Joseph was in seventh.

Both were well mannered, straight-A students, who worked around the house - even

cooked supper on occasion - and went to church on Sundays.

Just about the only thing they didn't do together was Boy Scouts. Patrick and Joseph were in Cub Scouts for years, and even joined a Boy Scout Troop. But Joseph stuck with it after Patrick dropped out ... "too busy," he said. "yup, too busy."

Taylor, another eighth grader, was short for his age: four feet, ten inches. But what he lacked in height, he made up for in spirit.

"That boy just won't quit," said his coach, Mike McMahon.

With short-cropped sandy hair, Taylor was so thin, he could blow away in the wind. Even though he liked to goof around at times, he was serious about two things: sports and hunting. The son of Dave and Carlene Bartley, Taylor had cue-ball brown eyes, a whimsical smile and a frame that looked like a coat hanger.

Braxton, a seventh grader, was the show-off. He rarely missed an opportunity to have a good time. He once put on a football cheerleader's skirt during halftime and ran out onto the field and began to cheer. "There he goes again," his dad said.

His dad, Bill, wasn't too pleased. Bill Foster wanted his son to take life, sports and hunting seriously. Of all the boys in the Buck Brigade, Braxton was the most successful hunter. By age 10, he already had twelve kills to his name, nine of which were eight-point bucks or better.

Braxton was short, too, but as athletic as anyone that the school had seen in decades. "Goin' to be somethin' he is," Bill Foster would say. "Size doesn't matter; it's heart that counts." Certainly, Braxton had plenty of heart.

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As Patrick shut his locker door, he told Taylor and Braxton, "Keep yer mouth shut and you'll get to go with us."

"It's a deal," Braxton said affirmatively.

"Got that, right!" Taylor said.

If they only knew then the pact they were forging could result in their peril.