

Clear Cut

by Terry DeHart

John held up his pistol and racked the slide to chamber a round. He told me that he knew a few things. He knew I'd knocked up Nikki. *His* girl. He knew I'd taken Nikki to the free clinic in Gresham. He knew I wasn't his friend, because people don't do their friends like that. His words were burned into the air. There was no going back. I had no reply and the cab of my truck felt very small.

We were at the end of an unmarked logging road, and I didn't want to die. I wanted to get my gun from the glove box. I was sure I'd loaded it. I thought that if John saw me armed, he'd come to his senses. But the skin around his eyes was red and I started to believe I was at the end of it all.

I noticed the pits and cracks in the windshield, the big firs swaying in the wind, a glimpse of blue sky through the clouds. I saw a deer walk out of the woods and move towards us. The thought entered my mind that if John was going to shoot me, at least there would be a witness. I could see with the clarity that adrenaline brings. The doe's belly was swollen, she was pregnant, and I watched her graze on a small patch of grass. A ray of sunlight reached through the clouds and warmed her back and she looked happy. I smiled because it wasn't a bad last thing to see.

Then John followed my line of sight and saw the deer. He narrowed his eyes and before I could say anything, he got out of the truck and fired once, twice, three times. I saw the deer take a hit in the guts. She looked surprised and then she ran for the timber. I could see that she would get away and go into the trees and bleed and hurt for a few days before she died, and I knew I didn't have a choice. John was still shooting, but he'd lost his confidence and his shots were going low and kicking up mud.

I got my hands on the .44. I leaned out the window of the truck and put the sights on the bounding deer. Just a few yards from the tree line she slowed and turned so I could see her flank. She turned

and looked as if she had a question, and I pulled the trigger and my shot took her through the lungs. She fell down into the mud and kicked a few times and then was still. Her last breath condensed. A wisp of steam came from her nose and then it was over.

I let the muzzle of the .44 wander, not exactly pointing it at John, but he got the message. His knuckles went white on the grips of his pistol. We looked at each other, tense and grim at close range, but then John let some of the air out of his lungs. I got out of the truck and took the pistol from his hand. I unloaded it and put it in my waistband. I hiked across the clear-cut to the doe, just to be sure she was dead, and it was rough-going through the stumps and piles of slash. I was breathing hard because of the adrenaline and the altitude, and it took some time for me to get there.

When I saw the spoor of blood beside the deer, I knew she was dead. I knelt and pressed my palm against her pregnant belly and my hand came away wet with a clear fluid. The doe's swollen flank moved once, a small kick from inside, and then it didn't move anymore.

There was nothing else to do but drag the carcass into the trees. I covered it with brush, tucking it carefully into its final bed, and then I scrubbed my hands with cold, Oregon mud until they didn't seem to be made of anything so temporary as flesh and blood.

