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GARY PAULSEN

Author of the award-winning novel *Hatchet*

BRIAN'S

WINTER



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For Caitlin, Matt and Nick Spille

FOREWORD

This book was written for all those readers of *Hatchet* and *The River* who wrote (I received as many as two hundred letters a day) to tell me they felt Brian Robeson's story was left unfinished by his early rescue before, they said, "it became really hard going." They asked: "What would happen if Brian hadn't been rescued, if he had had to survive in the winter?" Since my life has been one of survival in winter—running two Iditarods, hunting and trapping as a boy and young man—the challenge became interesting, and so I researched and wrote *Brian's Winter*, showing what could and perhaps would have happened had Brian not been rescued.

For the purpose of this story it is necessary to shift the idea left by *Hatchet* and suppose that although Brian did retrieve the survival pack from the plane, he did not trigger a radio signal and did not get rescued. Other than that I hope I have remained true to the story in *Hatchet* and that this book will answer the question of Brian's winter survival.

It is important to note, however, that his previous knowledge was vital—he had to know summer survival to attempt living in winter. Had he been dropped in the winter with no previous knowledge of hunting, surviving, no education gained in the school of hard knocks during the summer, Brian probably would have died no matter what his luck or abilities.

Part One

FALL

Chapter ONE

Fall came on with a softness, so that Brian didn't realize what was in store—a hard-spined north woods winter—until it was nearly too late.

He had never thought he would be here this long. After the plane crash that marooned him in the wilderness he had lived day by day for fifty-four days, until he had found the survival pack in the plane. Then another thirty-five days through the northern summer, somehow living the same day-to-day pattern he had started just after the crash.

To be sure he was very busy. The emergency pack on the plane had given him a gun with fifty shells—a survival .22 rifle—a hunting knife with a compass in the handle, cooking pots and pans, a fork, spoon and knife, matches, two butane lighters, a sleeping bag and foam pad, a first-aid kit with scissors, a cap that said CESSNA, fishing line, lures, hooks and sinkers, and several packets of freeze-dried food. He tried to ration the food out but found it impossible, and within two weeks he had eaten it all, even the package of dried prunes—something he'd hated in his old life. They tasted like candy and were so good he ate the whole package in one sitting. The results were nearly as bad as when he'd gluttoned on the gut cherries when he first landed. His stomach tied in a knot and he spent more than an hour at his latrine hole.

In truth he felt relieved when the food was gone. It had softened him, made him want more and more, and he could tell that he was moving mentally away from the woods, his situation. He started to think in terms of the city again, of hamburgers and malts, and his dreams changed.

In the days, weeks and months since the plane had crashed he had dreamed many times. At first all the dreams had been of food—food he had eaten, food he wished he had eaten and food he wanted to eat. But as time progressed the food dreams seemed to phase out and he dreamed of other things—of friends, of his parents (always of their worry, how they wanted to see him; sometimes that they were back together) and more and more of girls. As with food he dreamed of girls he knew, girls he wished he had known and girls he wanted to know.

But with the supplies from the plane his dreams changed back to food and when it was gone—in what seemed a very short time—a kind of wanting hunger returned that he had not felt since the first week. For a week or two he was in torment, never satisfied; even when he had plenty of fish and rabbit or foolbird to eat he thought of the things he *didn't* have. It somehow was never enough and he seemed to be angry all the time, so angry that he wasted a whole day just slamming things around and swearing at his luck.

When it finally ended—wore away, was more like it—he felt a great sense of relief. It was as if somebody he didn't like had been visiting and had finally gone. It was then that he first really noted the cold.

Almost a whiff, something he could smell. He was hunting with the rifle when he sensed the change. He had awakened early, just before first light, and had decided to spend the entire day hunting and get maybe two or three foolbirds. He blew on the coals from the fire the night before until they glowed red, added some bits of dry grass, which burst into flame at once, and heated water in one of the aluminum pots that had come in the plane's survival pack.

"Coffee," he said, sipping the hot water. Not that he'd ever liked coffee, but something about having a hot liquid in the morning made the day easier to start—gave him time to think, plan his morning. As he sipped, the sun came up over the lake and for the hundredth time he noted how beautiful it was—mist rising, the new sun shining like gold.

He banked the fire carefully with dirt to keep the coals hot for later, picked up the rifle and moved into the woods.

He was, instantly, hunting.

All sounds, any movement went into him, filled his eyes, ears, mind so that he became part of it, and it was then that he noted the change.

A new coolness, a touch, a soft kiss on his cheek. It was the same air, the same sun, the same morning, but it was different, so changed that he stopped and raised his hand to his cheek and touched where the coolness had brushed him.

"Why is it different?" he whispered. "What smell ..."

But it wasn't a smell so much as a feeling, a newness in the air, a chill. There and gone, a brush of new-cool air on his cheek, and he should have known what it meant but just then he saw a rabbit and raised the little rifle, pulled the trigger and heard only a click. He recoiled the bolt, made certain there was a cartridge in the chamber and aimed again—the rabbit had remained sitting all this time—and pulled the trigger once more. *Click*.

He cleared the barrel and turned the rifle up to the dawn light. At first he couldn't see anything different. He had come to know the rifle well. Although he still didn't like it much—the noise of the small gun seemed terribly out of place and scared game away—he had to admit it made the shooting of game easier, quicker. He had a limited number of shells and realized they would not last forever, but he still had come to depend on the rifle. Finally, as he pulled the bolt back to get the light down in the action, he saw it.

The firing pin—a raised part of the bolt—was broken cleanly away. Worse, it could not be repaired without special tools, which he did not have. That made the rifle worthless, at least as far as being a gun was concerned, and he swore

and started back to the camp to get his bow and arrows and in the movement of things completely ignored the warning nature had put on his cheek just before he tried to shoot the rabbit.

In camp he set the rifle aside—it might have some use later as a tool—and picked up the bow.

He had come to depend too much on the rifle and for a moment the bow and handful of arrows felt unfamiliar to his hands. Before he was away from the camp he stopped and shot several times into a dirt hummock. The first shot went wide by two feet and he shook his head.

Focus, he thought, bring it back.

On the second shot he looked at the target, into the target, drew and held it for half a second—focusing all the while on the dirt hump—and when he released the arrow with a soft *thrum* he almost didn't need to watch it fly into the center of the lump. He knew where the arrow would go, knew before he released it, knew almost before he drew it back.

From my brain, he thought, from my brain through my arm into the bow and through the string to the arrow it must all be one, and it *is* all one.

Three more times he shot and the arrows drove into the center of the hummock and then he was satisfied.

He left the camp again, put the sleeve quiver made from his old windbreaker on his right shoulder and walked slowly, watching, listening until he saw the curve of the back of a rabbit near a small clump of hazel brush.

It was too far for a shot and he quickly averted his eyes and froze for a moment before moving closer. He'd learned much from the woods, from mistakes, and one thing he'd come to know was that game spooked if it "felt" that it was known. It was always better to look away, move sideways instead of directly toward it, and he worked now to the left, letting the brush cover his movement until he was no more than fifteen feet away from the rabbit.

He drew the bow, aimed for the center of the rabbit and released when he felt the arrow would fly right.

It took the rabbit almost exactly in the center of its chest and drove through cleanly, killing it almost instantly.

They were not all this clean, the kills, and he was grateful. He had not grown accustomed to killing in spite of how much of it he had done.

He had learned this: Nothing that lived, nothing that walked or crawled or flew or swam or slithered or oozed—nothing, not one thing on God's earth wanted to die. No matter what people thought or said about chickens or fish or cattle—they all wanted to live.

But Brian had become part of nature, had become a predator, a two-legged

wolf. And there was a physics to it, a basic fact, almost a law: For a wolf to live, something else had to die. And for Brian to live it was the same. His body was a machine, it needed food, needed calories, and for that to happen something had to die. But sometimes it did not go well. Sometimes the arrow did not hit a vital place—did not hit the heart or lungs—and the rabbit or grouse died more slowly. The first time this had happened a kind of panic had taken him. He had shot a rabbit through the middle, the stomach, and it had tried to run and then had flopped around and he had shot the rabbit again and again, pounding arrows into the poor thing until it had at last died and when he'd cooked it and eaten it—as hunger forced him to do—the rabbit had tasted like wood and made him so sick he nearly threw up.

It was the only thing he had liked about the rifle. It killed quickly, caused a kind of wound shock that stunned as it killed.

But he was once more with the bow now and the silence of it brought him back to being more a part of the woods and he moved easily as he carried the dead rabbit back to camp.

It was afternoon by the time he had the fire rekindled and had set to cleaning the rabbit. Much had changed since he had retrieved the survival pack from the plane. He had a hunting knife now, and that made cleaning game much easier and faster.

He still wasted nothing. He used the knife to split the rabbit down the middle of the belly and skinned it carefully and then gutted it, using the curve of the knife to clean out the cavity. The head and lungs and intestines and stomach and liver he set aside for fish bait and food, as well as the heart. Then he cut the body up into pieces, carving it at the joints, and put them in a pot with fresh lake water, which he set on the fire to boil. He had found it best to boil everything. Initially he had cooked meat over the fire on a stick—something he had seen in movies and on television—but it was the wrong way to cook. The flame heated the meat and all the juices—all the vitamins and nutrients—dripped into the fire. Everything was wasted. But by boiling the meat he made a stew and when he drank the juice-broth he not only had a rich soup but something to sip as well.

He leaned back against the rock wall next to his shelter opening and took a minute to think while the meat cooked. It amazed him how little time he had to do that—sit and think. It seemed the longer he was in the woods—he had marked sixty-eight days counting this day—the more there was to do. Firewood was an endless chore of course—he kept the fire going whenever he was there and banked it when he left. And since he had burned all the easy wood, the wood close to camp, it took longer to bring wood in. But that wasn't all of his life and it seemed that everything he had to do doubled.