

The DUCK SHACK



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Chapter 1

It's late. We're driving in the Suburban. Tomorrow is the opening day of duck season. I can't wait!

It's a long drive to the duck shack, though. I close my eyes and tuck my head into my soft pillow against the car door.

A vision of last year's duck opener is burned into my memory. Playing it like a movie in my mind, I relive one of the amazing moments from that early Saturday morning . . .

A huge flock of twenty giant mallards circled the bouncing decoys we had set out on the cold water. The ducks were almost close enough to shoot—but not quite. Dad held us back.

The leader of the flock steered the others out to the big water. But then she circled them back. She couldn't resist the decoys' invitation.

The flock headed right to us. I could see the green heads of the male ducks shimmering in the early morning sun. The flock was now following our string of decoys. We might as well have been reeling them right to our laps.

Closer they came. I could hear a couple of them quacking. We stayed perfectly still. We didn't want to flare them.

My eyes got bigger with each flap of their wings. My heart pounded. My hands gripped my trusty 20-gauge tight. My finger was on the safety, ready to free my gun for action.

They came right over our decoys. Half of them set their wings, committed to landing on the water.

*Then I heard Dad's magic words:
"Take 'em!"*

I jumped up and locked on a giant green head right in front of me. I pulled my gun tight to my cheek and looked down the barrel. A racing drake turned hard to my right. As I followed him, the gun flowed as if it were a part of me.

At last, I pulled my bead on the barrel in front of him and let the shot fly. He

folded up, fell through the air, and crashed into the water.

The feeling of victory overtook my body! My heart pounded even harder than before.

Duck hunting is awesome!

Suddenly, a bump in the road causes my head to slip from the pillow. It brings me back to reality. I take a deep breath and open my eyes.

The Suburban's headlights are bouncing off the endless trees as we splash through mud puddles and crawl over the uneven road. We left the safety of the blacktop two miles ago. We're almost to the shack!

I look over at my sister, Crystal. She had been dozing against the other door in the back seat, but now she's awake too.

She brushes her hair out of her eyes. She and I have the same color of hair—red. We got that from Dad. Crystal's hair is by far the longest, though. It goes below her shoulders.

I'm Luke. I love hunting and fishing more than you can imagine. My dad has been taking Crystal and me into the woods and out on the water since we were tiny.

Crystal is a year and a half older than me. She loves the outdoors too. Even though she loves hunting, she's not *quite* as crazy about it as Dad and I are. She also loves volleyball, which gets in the way of hunting at times. Thankfully, she could

make it this weekend for the duck opener. It's cool having her around.

The final dirt road before the driveway into the duck shack is long and rough. It loves trying to suck your tires into the mud. We've made many trips up and down this road, and Dad's expert driving hasn't failed us yet. We always make it! This time is no different.

The old yard light fills the final stretch of the driveway, welcoming us. The little red cabin we call the duck shack is in sight. This place has turned into one of my favorite places to be.

Dad and three of his hunting buddies bought the duck shack years ago. It's tucked back in the woods, just off Leech Lake in northern Minnesota. Leech is a giant lake with a bunch of back channels and bays.



Our bay is shallow. Most of it is only five feet deep. The bottom is mucky and soft, which isn't great for much. But it seems to be the perfect bottom for wild rice to grow. The entire back channel is filled with it.

The gold and green stems shoot out of the water. There seem to be a million of them. They're typically four to six feet

tall. In some spots, they're so thick we can't drive our duck boat through them.

Wild rice is the perfect side dish next to a mouthwatering duck breast drizzled with honey. And where wild rice grows is also the perfect spot for duck hunting!

The rice that falls to the bottom of the lake draws ducks from miles around. On a good fall morning, we might see a thousand ducks fill our back channel. It's a great place to rest during their long migration south. Our channel gives them some open water but also some places to hide. Most importantly, it gives them lots to eat.

We park on the beat-down grass of the front yard. Our lights shine out over our little round harbor.

Years ago, Dad and his buddies had a backhoe dig a harbor that tucks in and

around the trees. This is now the perfect spot for our camo-painted flat-bottom duck boats. The harbor protects us from the angry northwest winds from the big lake.

Those winds blow all the ducks from the lake into our back channel. But oh man—when that wind is blowing, it's cold! You have to bundle up when you're out in the duck boats. Anticipating all those ducks flying right at us helps keep me warm and toasty inside too.

When Dad turns off the engine, Crystal and I jump out at the same time. The cool fall air hits me. I wish I would have thrown on my camo jacket.

But there's no time for that now. We need to get our gear into the shack and see who's here!



Chapter 2

Dad pushes open the door to the shack. The last of the white paint is trying its best to cover up the old wood.

As we file into the shack, we walk right into thick smoke coming from the cast-iron fireplace. The smoke hovers along the ceiling like a low cloud. Dad waves his hand in front of his face to create some cleaner air.