



Chapter One The First Decoy

“Shouldn’t we hear the water moving?”

“Shh . . . I think I hear something.”

“Is it the water?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Shouldn’t it be?”

“Shh . . .”

It should have been. He could feel it. Something was wrong. That feeling was chilling his bones deeper than the near-zero temperature that had recently swept down the Delaware River into southern New Jersey. It needled at him as Christmas does a young boy in the long predawn hours before he’s allowed out of his bed. Christmas itself was less than a week past.

His parents had been good to him, as they always were, but some of his gifts still sat under the tree hardly touched. School was out and getting out of the house as early as possible, spending nearly every daylight minute walking the fields near his home became the priority. Those gifts under the tree paled in comparison to that freedom.

He tried to see through the thorny pile of brush that he hid within, tried to see the water he couldn’t hear, but these thickets had less holes than his Christmas tree back home. This part of the woods had never been cut. Farmers left woods like these along their streams as

natural and thick as could be. They created a windbreak that protected their fields in the dry season.

For the two boys, these thickets blocked out what little light there was in the hour before dawn. White and black oak, Jersey white cedar, and evergreens stood around them, all interwoven with a tangle of briars that seemed to thrive even in the winter. They made it so dark Vince couldn’t see his hand in front of his face.

The boys had struggled in the dark to find this exact spot, even though they knew the path into this area well, having walked it dozens of times during the day. But they had never ventured through the thickets at night. Whatever else they might get today, they would both take home more than one long, deep scratch as a prize.

The darkness had also made it hard to see the skim ice over the small potholes of water. Both had stepped through ice in several spots and were nursing wet, cold feet. This section of the stream where they lay now looked out into a small patch of wetlands about fifty yards across. The spongy ground was a mix of knee-high grass and brown-topped punks that rose taller than both boys. In early January the entire area was a brown wasteland, everything looked dead. On either side, the wetlands ran off into the deeper woods before opening up into

farmer Sutton's fields. Since they were facing south, behind their backs, across Perkins Lane and then down Delanco Road, lie their homes. It was nearly two miles to the school bus stop where they always met up on days like today.

Vince flexed his toes to get the blood moving and dull the way they burned. He inhaled the bitterly cold air and blew it out. It captured just enough light from somewhere to look like steam. The air froze his nose hairs and burned his cheeks. What he wouldn't give for a thick beard on mornings like this.

The stream in front of them was small, hardly even that if they were being honest. It was an offshoot of the Rancocas Creek, which eventually wound its way out to the Delaware River—The River. That's where the real action was. But there was no way they could get out on that deeper water and reach the good hunting spots. Even a canoe wouldn't work. At their age, they would need a boat with a motor to fight the current in the shallow, swift river. Even in a small stream like this, they were limited to the areas they could reach by walking and had to avoid hunting areas where the current ran too quick and would carry away any ducks he and Johnny might be lucky enough to bag before they could retrieve them.

Some day he would get there. He knew it. He would hunt this little stream and the farmer's potholes that surrounded it only as long as he had to; eventually, he would get out on the river and hunt alongside the old-timers. He'd sport hunting gear that would make them jealous, a dozen of the newest decoys, a boat with a foreign-made motor that started on the first pull—every time.

In time, just like the explorers of old, he'd follow little water like this stream back to a real creek such as the Rancocas. Named after

the Native American Indians who made their home on its shores, Rancocas Creek was big enough water to hold the large springtime carp. Turtle would float through its waters, ducking below whenever they caught site of anything suspicious. Muskrat and otters made their home along its muddy banks. Fox would work them looking for their homes and their young. Insatiable herons and egrets would work the shallow water and small tidal pools looking for breakfast, then lunch, then dinner, then a late night snack, only to begin again the next day. Birds of prey would circle above, keeping an eye on the entire food chain, looking for anything that got too caught up searching for their next meal to remember that they too could become something else's next meal. Life along the bigger water was an endless circle that could easily be seen if people just took the time to sit still and watch. Vince had spent countless hours doing just that—sitting and watching.

Admittedly, the two boys were lucky to be able to hunt even this little stream today. Normally they'd just walk along the banks looking for rabbit, quail, or pheasants, and if they got lucky, they'd jump a duck or two. They'd never been lucky enough to kill one of those ducks, or bag one, as they liked to say. But they always seemed to jump them when they got to this section of the stream, where the banks turned into wetlands and the grasses ducks loved to eat grew more thickly.

Early last fall, after hunting game birds in the fields, they had come through this very patch of woods several times. Each of those times, they had jumped different groups of ducks. Usually it was mallards or black ducks, but they'd even seen a group of sleek, graceful pintails working their way through



Unknown river rat. (Courtesy Tuckerton Seaport, a project of Barnegat Bay Decoy & Baymen's Museum)

the grass before they jumped, whistled, and headed for the river.

By eight, Vincent could already identify nearly every type of duck along the river, even if he saw them flying in the distance. He spent many a late night up with his flashlight, thumbing through his old collection of waterfowl books until the corners were worn down. He suspected he knew most of the bigger ducks that lived out on the bay, or along the ocean, but he rarely got to see them.

Those same books, Christmas presents he had asked for nearly every year he could remember, also taught him what ducks liked to eat. Countless days walking in an ever-expanding area around his house had revealed where the foods they preferred could be found.

Ducks like pintails, mallards, and blacks were puddle ducks and liked to feed in the shallow water that allowed them to tip up and reach the bottom without diving under. This little section of wetland Vince and Johnny were sitting in front of now was perfect. Its shallow pools of water and soft, muddy pockets full of rich vegetation and small critters made it ideal.

The problem wasn't finding the ducks. They were everywhere this time of year. The problem was anticipating where they'd land. And the bigger problem was that even if the boys picked the right pond or stream, the ducks never, ever, seemed to land in front of them. They had to lure the ducks right in front of them. The trick was to convince the ducks that this little patch of wetlands, the patch just out in front of the pile of brush they hid within, was a nice, safe, cozy place to rest out the day, feeding, pruning, and napping. There was nothing more convincing than a pair of ducks already floating and napping in that very same spot when other ducks flew

over to pick out a spot to touch down. Thus, the two boys had made a deal.

When they had seen the pintails jump, they knew they would need decoys if they wanted to hunt here. Each of them had saved up his money to buy a papier-mâché decoy from the Beverly hardware store as a Christmas present next year. Those gifts, a pair of black duck decoys, were now floating in front of them. This was the first morning the two boys were ever able to use one of the oldest tricks in hunting. They would get a few ducks, even if they were made of papier-mâché, to sit out there and lure in the real ducks.

Vince had gone through great pains to earn and save the money to buy Johnny his decoy. He fished and hunted along the creeks, but carp weren't worth much money, and the sturgeon never came this far upstream. He'd taken to searching out turtles. Anytime he could sneak out of the house before his father assigned him too many chores, and if Johnny wasn't looking to go out and hunt the fields together, down to the creeks he'd go. He'd walk the banks and try to catch a turtle out of the water. When he did, he'd walk the two miles down into one of the small towns along the river, Delanco or Beverly, to find a restaurant that was looking to put snapper soup on the menu, and they'd pay a quarter or fifty cents each. It was time-consuming work, and he had only been successful a few times so far, but a deal was a deal, and he wasn't going to let Johnny, or himself, down. His goal was to be a duck hunter, and it was a goal he spent most of his time planning to achieve.

Vince had saved nickels all throughout the summer to come up with the \$1.50 he needed to get the decoy he would give Johnny. Those nickels, combined with the money he had

earned from catching turtles and shining shoes at his grandpop's shoe shop, were just enough to purchase the decoy and shotgun shells. Just a week before Christmas, he finally made the two-mile walk down to Beverly and bought the decoy. He hadn't wrapped it until Christmas Eve; instead he placed it on his bedroom shelf, where he could check it out at every opportunity.

He found himself waking in the middle of the night and quickly shining his flashlight on it to make sure it was still there. Just to check. He'd then have trouble falling back asleep, his head full of great hunts to come and a rig of a dozen such decoys out on the river impressing the local river men. That decoy was the key to his future. Without it, he could never bring the ducks in close enough, he could never gain the experience to hunt the bigger water and keep up with the older hunters.

He wasn't sure where Johnny had gotten the money to buy his decoy, but he had come up with it somehow. Sure enough, early in the morning the day after Christmas, Johnny had walked up on his back porch, grinning. They traded identical-size boxes, opened them, and exchanged knowing smiles. Vince's smile wasn't just young boy silly, but more the look of a cat sitting in front of the canary cage with the door wide open.

Just like that, the boys became duck hunters. Standing on the small back porch of his parent's home, on property that his family had lived on their entire time in this country, property that he himself would build a home on and never leave, Vince could never have known the impact that this small gift would have on nearly every aspect of his life and his future.

The night comes to its end each morning with

a quickness that is unknown to all but those who make their living from the land. It starts with a pale wash of orange that slowly shifts to red, then gray, and eventually reveals what the day has in store, sun or clouds, rain or snow, or some version of an endless combination. At first, the eye has trouble adjusting to the return of light and all shadows become a single black against the pale backdrop of the sky. All detail is lost in the half-light of the approaching sun.

These had always been precious moments to Vince. Perfect moments. Even before he was ten, he could remember getting up before first light to walk the fields around his house. Of course, most of those mornings he was only out of bed that early to clean out the horse stalls and feed the chickens or the pig before he headed off to school. But even on those mornings, he always took a moment or two to stop and watch the beginning of a new day.

As the sun began reaching toward the distant horizon, the marsh began stirring around the two boys. Canada geese rose from big water somewhere in the distance and trumpeted, calling back and forth to locate other flocks, welcome each other, or perhaps calling out which farmer's field they intended to destroy. A series of splashes in the stream echoed through the woods—maybe a fox breaking through the skim ice as it headed for home. Something took wing not far away, startling the boys and adding to the excitement. The absence of sight caused the sounds to amplify in the dark; they always seemed closer than they really are. Around them, the marsh came to life in anticipation of a new day.

Hunters understood how important first light was. Ducks moved then more than any other time during the day. They stirred from

their nightly roosts, hungry or scared or in search of safer water. Perhaps they felt a need to demonstrate their dominance of the sky after so many hours tied to the ground. Perhaps they just liked to fly.

The two boys had made sure they'd be in place by setting their little wind-up alarm clocks for 2:30 in the morning. Whatever the reason for ducks flying at first light, they hardly mattered to the two young boys that hid in the small clump of bushes along the bank of farmer Sutton's stream. Today was their day. Today they would fool these ducks. Today they had two brand-new decoys.

Despite the bitter cold, despite the wet feet and the increasingly wet ass he was getting, as the water soaked through the tarp they were laying on, there could never have been a more perfect morning for Vince than today. He pulled his hand-me-down shotgun closer to his chest. He rubbed his fingers on the barrel and could feel the intricate pattern of the rust.

"Did you say something?"

"No, Johnny. Can you hear the water running?"

"No, Buddy." The nickname everyone called him. It had started as Buttons when he was just a baby. Something his mom came up with. He always thought it had to do with his nose, but it could have been his small, dark eyes. As he got older, someone changed it to Buddy, and it just stuck. Hardly anyone used Vincent or even Vince anymore; some people didn't even know Buddy wasn't his real name.

"No, I can't hear the water, now be quiet, you know they always move at first light. Let's not blow it on our first day. I told my grandma we'd bring something back for her to cook."

He knew they always moved at first light. He

always seemed to know how the ducks would move. And he knew something was wrong.

The sun broke the horizon and threw a blood-red tint on the water. All sound stopped; the creek took a pause on its journey to the river. Cold toes stopped burning. Numb fingers stopped tingling. The two boys held their breath and sat as if they'd been flash frozen.

A single word rose from Vince's throat.

"No."

Once uttered, the word kept bubbling from his mouth. He murmured it over and over.

"No, no, no, no . . ."

It kept rising from his throat as his heart sank within his chest. He couldn't take his eyes from the stream. He couldn't stop the sinking feeling in his chest. He didn't want to look at Johnny. He was scared to see his horror mirrored there.

Out in the creek, bits and pieces of black painted paper lay scattered on a sheet of skim ice that surrounded a clump of dead marsh grass sticking from the water five feet from the bank. Both decoys reclined on their sides, staring into the ice that stopped them from floating freely in the water as they should.

Resting on the ice, these decoys didn't shift from one foot to the other as real ducks standing on ice do. Being decoys, they didn't even have any feet. They weren't meant to stand on land or rest on ice.

They were never meant to be thrown into water that had iced over in the unusual cold spell by two boys who had never used these tools of the hunting trade. There the two decoys lay, mirroring the slumped bodies of the ducks the boys had hoped to lure in and bag. Smashed. Ruined. Destroyed. Their missing pieces pulled downstream in the darkness. They looked as if

they were bleeding in the red light of the frozen morning sky.

It took Vince several long moments to begin thinking straight; flashbacks kept coming at him. All that he'd done to make this morning possible. All the sacrifices to become a real duck hunter. He began thinking of the things that would never be possible now: the hunts he could never go on, the good times he and Johnny would never share, the stories he'd never be able to turn into tall tales. Without these decoys, he'd never be able to do more than hunt rabbits, something anyone could do, never do more than sit in fields and wait for pigeons or crows to flock in. He'd never join the ranks of the great hunters along the river.

For a moment, his dream, like the decoys, was ruined. He and Johnny were different, or so he liked to believe. All the local boys had access to a shotgun, and most of them walked the fields with those guns. Being young boys, they shot at nearly everything that moved. Most of these boys missed nearly every single time, and in short order, they took to shooting at things that couldn't run away from them—bottles, trees, street signs. But he and Johnny were never like that. They never wasted shotgun shells on stupid things, and not just because they could only afford to buy one or two shells at a time, just because it was, well, stupid. To them hunting was serious business, and the game one took from the fields was to be respected for what it had given.

To Vince, duck hunting was a step above hunting the fields for game birds. Anyone could walk out their back door and take up rabbit hunting. They might not be able to hit the broad side of a barn, but they would still be a rabbit hunter. It took significantly more skill to hunt waterfowl, to be a duck hunter.

Unlike hunting rabbits and game birds, hunting ducks isn't just about finding them so that you can shoot them; it is about understanding them. With this understanding comes the ability to figure out where the duck will be before it arrives. The duck lives on water and can fly; the duck always has the upper hand in its relationship with the hunter, right up until the moment it makes a mistake. The main ingredient in getting those ducks to make a mistake is the decoy—a fellow duck whose sole purpose throughout its nonexistent life is to lure in the real thing.

This relationship between man, duck, and decoy was never more clear to Vince than in the minutes following the devastating moment when he saw their two Christmas presents shattered on the ice.

"What now?" Johnny asked.

"Let's go get them. Let's see how bad they look."

"They look bad."

"I know. Let's get them."

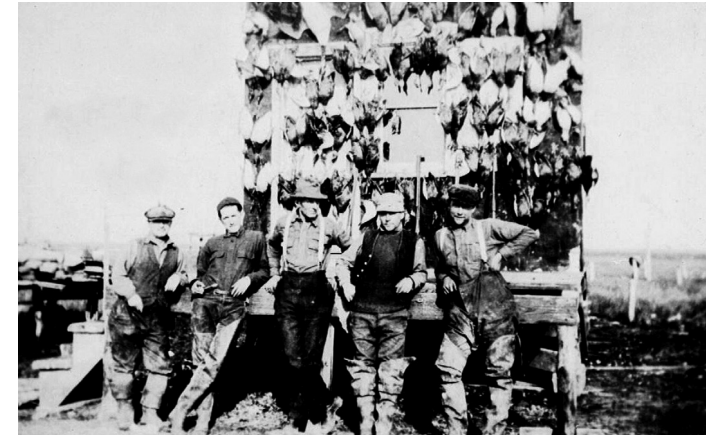
"They're too far out. We'll get pretty wet." That was true. They had bounced across the ice, spilling little bits of their papier-mâché as they went. It reminded Vince of the trail of crap geese left on the frozen ponds when they waddled across them. It looked like the anchor weights had skidded farther, and when they sunk into the deeper part of the stream, they pulled the two wounded decoys even farther out.

To reach them, they would actually have to walk into the water. It was well below zero outside. They were nearly two miles from home.

"I'll get them," said Vince.

"Your feet will freeze off on the way home."

"We can't leave them. We need them. They might not be here when we come back." Small



Pat Gallagher (left) and unknown hunters from the Tuckerton area, circa 1930. (Courtesy of Tuckerton Seaport, a project of Barnegat Bay Decoy & Baymen's Museum)



Unknown hunter, circa 1925. (Courtesy Tuckerton Seaport, a project of Barnegat Bay Decoy & Baymen's Museum)

pieces of the ice flowing down the stream would build up on the line and pull them under. The papier-mâché would literally melt if it were underwater for too long.

Always the one to take charge when something needed to be done, Vince handed Johnny his gun and stepped into the water. He inhaled so sharply that Johnny jumped. The pain of deep cold gripped him instantly. He shuffled along, trying to keep feet he couldn't feel in contact with the soft bottom. After two steps, he sunk to his knees and focused on keeping his balance as the mud closed around his calves. A sucking sound accompanied every step. A stink rose from the black mud. He stared at the decoys, focused on the prize, and in a few steps, he reached down and picked them from the ice. He didn't bother pulling in the line, he just shuffled back to the edge, dragging the anchors, seeking to get out of the water as quickly as he could.

The walk home was grueling. His feet grew completely numb after the first half-mile. Their numbness seemed to match the dead feeling he had inside. They pushed the pace, and the extra effort stopped his teeth from chattering hard enough to break a tooth.

The pain was nothing compared to his knowledge that decoys were the key to duck hunting. If he wanted to be a duck hunter, he needed decoys. The disaster had brought his mood down. He had been fooling himself this summer; he didn't need just these two; he needed a full dozen or more. He needed a whole hunting rig. There was no way he could buy that many. He would never be able to hunt the river.

The cold paled next to the realization that he had no other choice. He didn't know how he would do it, but if he wanted to hunt the river, he'd have to make his own decoys.