

THE YELLOW HONEYSUCKLE IS THE SWEETEST by Bill Fentress EXCERPT

There is something special about hunting, that sears in place our memories with others. Maybe it's the vivid nature where our grand experiences take place or the team efforts we go through to make it all happen? Maybe it's the getting up early, the black coffee, the smell of eggs and bacon in a cabin, the swoosh of ducks over decoys or the violent uprising of a big covey followed by the delirium of released bird dogs? Maybe it's the sunrises, the sunsets, the gobbles at dawn, the split oak fires or the oysters? Maybe it's the bonds we have over lifetimes? I'm not really sure. But I do know we're blessed when these partners come into our lives.

Like many boys, my first hunting partner was a dog, Pepper. I wish I could say Pepper was the granddaughter of King Rothschild's Sire of Pepper Creek, but I cannot. Pepper was a fittingly, albeit not uniquely, named black and white pointer-mix stray who took up at Miss Jo's house in Bayboro. Somehow, through either constant brow beating with her pathetic brown eyes or via her constant hanging around the back door looking for food, Pepper convinced Miss Jo to call me—not my mother, her friend—but me.

"Billy," she commanded, "I have a beautiful dog you would just love!"

Of course, I immediately got off the phone and begged Mom to take me to Bayboro. "Miss Jo's got a dog she says I need!" I always thought Miss Jo should have led many of the sales classes I attended in my banking career. Let me tell you, she talked directly to the buyer, and went right around the secretary. While I'm not sure how long it took for Mom to talk to her again, we came home with Pepper in the Chevy wagon and me with a smile as broad as the cuff on my dungarees. Pepper was one of the smartest dogs I ever owned. She followed me everywhere—from our store to Grandmamma's house to the woods behind our house to the tractor shelter woods across the road, down Swan Point Road, and of course behind our neighbor's house. Pepper was smart enough to look both ways before she crossed the road. Don't smirk; I saw her do it a hundred times. She also knew how to be quiet as I planned a sneak-up strategy on the local robins and wrens. But her mind absolutely took the day off when it came to our neighbor's chickens.