

THE WILD HUNT

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Chapter One Sample

The snow was coming down in a frenzy; not drifting lazily to the ground, but hammering the earth and everything it touched. Cars were merely shapes under the thick blanket of frozen white, and while the houses hadn't disappeared yet, it seemed a real possibility.

Mark Loman was just fine with that. He hadn't wanted to go into work today anyway, and now all he had to do with his time was watch a few movies and put up with his wife and kids. Lou and Ellen were good kids; they were easy to deal with. Donna, his wife, was another story entirely. Ever since she'd gone back to work, she'd become a shrew of epic scale.

He looked where she sat with her little laptop, chain-smoking her damned cigarettes, and managed not to sneer. When they'd married she would have been best described as "handsome". With a thin build and her auburn hair, her easy going smile and her sense of humor, she was always fun to be around, but she'd never quite made it to beautiful. Now, after almost twenty years of tanning herself whenever she got a chance, and eating enough food to keep a sparrow underweight, she was all bones and leathery skin. She looked more like one of the stuffed hunting trophies in his den than like the woman he'd fallen in love with.

She looked up at him and smiled, and her face was closer to what he liked to see than the pinched, hard expression he had grown used to of late. She was back to handsome at least, and that was a step in the right direction.

Did he love her anymore? He really didn't know, but he was certainly comfortable with her and just too damned lazy to change. He looked away after throwing her a quick smile of his own in return, and looked at the two kids on the floor, watching *The Wizard of Oz*. Lou and Ellen were good, sweet kids. He was proud of them despite their occasional shortcom-

ings — Lou liked to go out and party too much and Ellen was happiest when she was being a drama queen like her mother — and he loved them with all of his heart.

If he didn't, he'd probably have left Donna instead of just finding some action on the side.

The wind picked up outside just as flying monkeys were attacking the scarecrow in the movie, and both of the kids jumped a little as the hard breeze slammed into the house with enough force to shake the windows. Mark smiled and stood up. "Gonna make some popcorn, guys. Who wants some?"

Lou and Ellen were both crying "I do!" around the same time the front door imploded.

The house had been built to withstand the sort of weather going on outside. Mark stared hard at the fractured wood — some sliding across the hardwood floor, and some scattered down the short foyer leading into the living room — without any real idea of what the hell had just happened. He presumed his kids didn't know either, as they were releasing ear shattering screams. Donna squealed as well, and judging by the ache in his throat that hadn't been there a second ago, he must have let out a good one, too. He didn't remember screaming but that didn't mean it didn't happen.

The cold from outside moved into the room with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer, and brought with it a feral stench. Not foul, exactly, but musky and wild. Mark turned and headed down the hallway toward his den, where he kept his firearms. He saw something in the open threshold, a dark, furry shape, and decided the best thing he could do was be armed when whatever was out there came inside.

Donna screamed, "Where the hell are you going?" and ran toward the two children, ready to grab them off the carpet and hide them away, which was exactly what he hoped she'd do.

Mark didn't answer her. He was far too busy opening the locked door to his private sanctuary and grabbing for his shotgun. Most of his weapons were locked away — he had kids, after all and he didn't want them ending up on the news for accidentally blowing each other away because he got stupid — but he kept the one firearm socked behind the door and hidden behind an American flag for any possible emergencies. The weapon was loaded and the box of shells was at the base of the flag. He had both in his hands, and was heading back down the hallway, before he could really give any conscious thought to the action. He'd done his time in the service and he'd remembered the lessons he learned.

He moved back into the hallway as he checked the chambers and made sure the .12 gauge was loaded. By the time he was back in the living room, the TV had moved on to another singing number, and his wife and kids were backed up in the corner by what looked like a bear.

Mark's heart skipped three beats while he assessed the situation. It wasn't a bear, and it

wasn't alone. Black fur covered a hard, muscular form that was designed as much for speed as for power. *Not a bear*, he thought, trying to decide exactly what it was. It was closer to a wolf, but the body shape was still wrong. The thing paced in front of his family, staring with oddly glowing eyes. It kept a bared muzzle full of teeth close to the legs of his loved ones.

There were three more of the things in the living room, all of them staring hard at the hallway where Mark stood.

"Mark! Do something!" Donna's voice cracked and strained as she looked at the thing in front of her. Lou and Ellen were held close to her and partially behind her as she shielded them with her own body. In that moment she looked more beautiful than he'd ever seen her.

Mark lifted the shotgun to his shoulder and sighted it at the monster closest to his family. "Donna, don't you move a muscle, honey."

A chorus of growls answered his gesture and the one nearest Donna snapped its teeth inches away from her left knee. It sent the children into tears.

Mark's hand trembled a bit. He wasn't sure if he could kill the thing without, at the very least, injuring his wife. The cold from outside was spilling in, along with a thick layer of snow, and it chilled his body, adding to his doubts about making a clean kill.

"Now, I wouldn't go and do anything too hasty there, fella." The voice came from the doorway and Mark spun hard, his eyes focusing on the man standing there. He'd seen him somewhere before but couldn't for the life of him remember exactly where.

"What the fuck is going on here?" He looked at the stranger, doing his best to sound like he was in control of the situation. He was good at bluffing that sort of thing; it was how he'd managed to turn his single bay garage into the biggest chain of automotive repair stores in the Midwest.

The stranger stepped closer, into the light of the living room, and revealed more of his face. He stepped forward with the confidence of a general facing off against a battalion of fresh recruits.

"What's going on here depends on you, Mr. Loman." The voice was deep, and the man was just a little intimidating. He was tall, easily a few inches over six feet, and he was dressed in a hooded parka that was still covered with melting snow. Denim pants layered with a crust of ice and thick, black leather boots that dropped crushed slush to the hardwood floor finished off the outfit.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I want some answers from you. If you answer me truthfully, we might just go away and leave your family alone. If you lie, we'll kill you, but we'll make you watch them die first."

Donna started crying, and the kids increased the volume of their own wails of misery.

Mark kept the business end of the shotgun aimed at the stranger's chest.

"What the hell are you talking about?" He asked the question, but even as the words left his mouth, he thought he knew.

The broad, weathered face looking at him wore a small, knowing smile. "Do I have to say it in front of your family, Loman? Do you really want me to do that?" His voice was soft, barely even carried to him past the wind from outside, but Mark saw the look on Donna's face switch for a second from panic to curiosity.

"I-No. Just ask your questions."

"Who else was there?"

He looked into the man's eyes, puzzled by their color. Hadn't they been blue a moment before? He couldn't be certain. Maybe it had just been the lighting, but now they were brown, dark and deep, and focused on him to the exclusion of everything else.

"I don't know. I wasn't there when that happened."

Those dark eyes stayed on his, and he swallowed softly. He was also a very good liar. He had been for a long time.

Finally the man nodded. "Kill his bitch."

"What? NO!" Mark started pulling the trigger on his shotgun but felt the impact move up his arms as the stranger grabbed the long barrel and pointed it toward the wall. The hammer rose and fell, setting off an explosion that blasted through the wood paneling along the wall and shattering the plaster behind it.

Mark looked past the stranger's brutal face just as the thing on the ground stood up, rising in height until it could barely stand in the room. When he'd been young Mark, he'd had a St. Bernard that used to stand on its back legs and place its paws on his shoulders when it came to greet him. That old dog had stood close to six feet tall when it was in that position, and it had weighed in at 185 pounds. The thing that reached out with one paw and grabbed Donna by the throat was much bigger.

Donna let out a cry of fear and desperate pain as the claws on the thing sank slightly into her neck and drew blood. She was lifted completely off her feet, and hauled toward the bared teeth in front of her. Ellen and Lou tried to hold on, to anchor their mother, but were easily shaken off by the monster.

Mark tried to keep his grip on the shotgun, but the man he'd just tried to kill ripped it out of his hands and cast it aside. The parka covered arm wrapped around his neck and spun him forward into the living room proper as the other dark shapes moved easily out of the way.

Mark struggled, he did, but it didn't seem to do him the least bit of good. He fought and kicked and cursed, his mind focused solely on getting to Donna and saving her.

"Watch this, Loman. You did this. Remember that." There was no humor in the voice,

only regret tinged with anger.

“Oh, God! Please! I’ll tell you whatever you want to know, just leave her alone!” His voice trembled and broke as he pleaded.

The man behind him grabbed his hair in one hand and held his skull with enough force to make the bones creak. “Keep watching! You keep watching, Loman or I swear I’ll make your children suffer for hours.”

Donna had tears running down her face and her teeth bared as she hyperventilated. She’d been trying to get away all along, but the grip on her neck was simply too powerful. Despite trying to rake her nails over the furry arm that held her, she hadn’t managed to get through the thick pelt of hair to catch any flesh.

For the first time, Mark finally and really focused on the face of the thing that carried his wife. He was a hunter; he knew damned near every animal on the planet well enough to identify it. This grinning thing was nothing that should have existed. There were marks in the black fur, patterns within the shadow of the rich, dark pelt. The face bore every indication of belonging to a predator, from the forward facing eyes to the wrinkled muzzle above a set of teeth designed to cut flesh and break bones. It was standing on two hind legs, but the way they bent made it obvious the thing was more comfortable running on all fours. The torso was wide, and being a man who prided himself on staying in shape, Mark knew that some of the clusters of muscle that stretched over the ribcage had never been designed to accommodate a four-legged creature.

The eyes looked back at him, taking his measure, and found him lacking.

“Mark! Please! Don’t let them do this!” Donna was panicked, and he couldn’t find any fault in that. He was terrified himself; imagining the damage the teeth would cause and already knowing the reasons for the attack.

“Oh, Donna. I’m so sorry, honey.”

The stranger spoke again, his voice a deadly rumble. “Are you now? You certainly weren’t crying *then*, were you?”

“She has nothing to do with this!” He tried one last time to break free, and felt the fingers holding his head push forward, driving thick nails into his scalp. The pain was enough to make him stop, to make him scream out again.

“I know. She’s innocent in this. That’s what makes it such a shame.”

The beast holding Donna looked at the man behind Mark and turned its head quizzically.

Two words and every hope that Mark had of coming out of this alive fell to pieces. Two words and his entire world exploded into ruin.

The man said, “Do it.”