

# Hunted

Dad flings open the cupboard door and grabs the gun. He drops two bullets into the barrel.

‘Come on, Toby. Let’s go hunt some wolves.’

I’m curled up beside the fire. The heat from the fire warms my back and my school work is spread around me. The snow hasn’t stopped all day. Even algebra is more appealing than going out there.

‘I need to do my homework,’ I reply.

‘It can wait. We’ll only be a couple of hours.’

Mum glances up from her book and sighs, but says nothing. There was a time when she would have made a fuss and told Dad it was too dangerous. She used to cry and beg us not to go. I guess she knows there’s no point in arguing anymore. Once Dad has it in his head that we are going, that’s it.

I gather my homework into a pile and trudge to the door, pulling on my boots and outdoor gear. As I wave goodbye to Mum, she smiles briefly, before dropping her eyes back down to her book.

We walk through the valley towards the forest. The icy wind whips around us, biting at my nose and cheeks. Dad strolls ahead and I follow, placing my feet in his snowy footsteps. The winter sun has barely risen above the horizon all day and it won’t be long before it completely disappears. The snow falls heavily, coating my back in a thick white blanket.

Dad stops abruptly. ‘Stop,’ he whispers. ‘Did you see that?’

I shake my head and squint at the trees ahead. There’s a flash of movement. A dark shape scuttles between the trees. With chattering teeth, I stand rigid. Dad kneels in the snow with his gun pointing towards the forest.

I wish he didn’t make me come every time. Ever since we lost Jamie, he has been obsessed with wolf-hunting. He tells me that he will kill every last one of them. I don’t understand how that’s going to make things better. It’s not going to bring back my little brother.

The gunshot cracks through the air like a whip and my body jolts. A mass of squawking birds rise from the trees.

‘Got him!’ Dad says, with a grin.

There, on the edge of the forest, a wolf lies on its side. Crimson blood trickles from its hind leg, soaking into the pristine snow. As we make our way towards the animal, I swallow hard, forcing back the tears.

I rip off my glove and gently place my hand on the wolf's head. The animal whimpers and its two piercing blue eyes stare back into mine.

'It's still alive.'

'Not for much longer,' Dad says, raising the shotgun to his shoulder. 'That damn bullet must have just skimmed past his leg.'

My cold, stiff fingers caress the wolf's velvety ears. The animal trembles. Its eyes dart first to my father, and then back to me.

'Out the way, Toby!' Dad yells. 'He'll have your hand off if you're not careful.' A howl echoes from the forest and another dark shape materialises between the trees.

'Here we go again,' Dad says, flicking the gun towards the shape. Another howl—but this time it's different. As it trails off, it is more like that of a human scream. I rush back to my father's side and clutch his coat. We watch and wait. He takes aim.

'Dad! Stop!'

Dad lowers his gun and grasps my hand. His warm gloved fingers squeeze mine. The creature is just visible as it scampers along the edge of the forest. A body covered in thick grey fur—yet child-like in its form and moving rapidly on hands and feet towards the injured wolf.

'What *is* that?' I whisper.

The creature is just metres in front of us, yet seems oblivious to our presence. It wraps its arms around the wolf, throws back its head and whines. Tears fall from its eyes into the blood-soaked snow. Then it stops, turning its head towards us. Its spine hunches as its bright blue eyes meet mine, sending a shiver through my body.

'It looks like a boy,' I say.

'Don't be so ridiculous.' Dad's voice tremors in a way I have never heard before, and his breathing quickens.

'Could it be? Dad, I think—'

Without a word, my father yanks my arm, pulling me away. Through the hazy white of falling snow, I can just make out the two figures huddled together. The howling has now turned to a wail; the unmistakable, agonising wail of a small child.

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I charge though the house until I reach my mother. My chest aches through desperate sobs and I fling my arms around her, burying my face in her apron.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asks, rubbing her hands over my quivering back.

The door slams shut and my father’s footsteps approach. He stumbles through the house, puffing deeply.

‘We just saw a wild animal,’ Dad says. ‘Some unusual species of wolf.’

I choke on my tears. ‘It was a boy!’

Mum’s arms loosen from around me and she grasps the kitchen bench. ‘A boy?’

‘Yes, I swear, Mum! I’m not lying!’

With that, she grabs her coat from the hook and pulls on her boots.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Dad yells.

‘There is a child out there! What do you think I’m doing?’

I run to her side. ‘I’m coming too.’

Dad sighs as he looks at us both. ‘You two ain’t going by yourselves. I’m calling Mick.’

I’m not sure why Dad wants to call Uncle Mick. We haven’t seen him in ages. Nothing is making any sense right now. He picks up the phone and disappears down the hall. When he reappears, he sticks his head into the cupboard and grabs another bullet, dropping it into the shotgun. Then, he pulls out a hessian sack.

‘Here boy,’ he says, pushing the sack into my hands. ‘Let’s go.’

Outside, we hurry through the valley with torches as the light becomes increasingly dim. My mother’s hand clasps mine until we reach the edge of the forest.

‘There,’ I whisper.

Right in front of us, just as we left it, the creature is huddled against the stomach of the motionless wolf. The two bodies are covered in a layer of snow, curled up together, as if they are one. The wolf’s lifeless eyes stare up at the sky.

Mum releases my hand and rushes forward. ‘Oh my god! Jamie!’

Dad grabs her arm. ‘He may attack. Stay back.’

It really is Jamie! My little brother who wandered into the forest two years ago. I desperately want to scream, I want to run and hold him. But I’m stuck here in silence, as if every part of my body has seized up. His face and eyes are just how I remember, yet the naked, fur-covered body is unrecognisable.

He stares intently at Mum and his leg muscles twitch, like a stunned rabbit ready to bolt.

Mum pulls her arm free from Dad's grasp. 'It's me sweetheart. It's me.'

A light dances in his eyes and the corners of his mouth turn upwards, forming a glimmer of a smile. She reaches out her hand and calls his name. On hands and feet, he walks to her, tentatively creeping through the snow. Dad grabs him and he yelps like an injured dog. His hands swipe Dad's face, scratching his skin.

'Don't just stand there! Open the bloody bag!'

I forgot I was even holding the hessian sack. I open it wide and my brother is dropped inside. Dad snatches the bag and ties it, before slinging it over his shoulder.

I slam my fist into my father's stomach. 'You're treating him like an animal! Let him out of there!'

Dad pushes me aside and strolls ahead.

'He *is* an animal.'

Mum stands still, transfixed on the squirming bag, with her face as white as her snow-covered shoulders. Dad turns and his eyes meet hers.

His voice is softer this time. 'Come on. Let's get everyone home and safe. It's going to be okay.'

We trudge back towards the house, while the bag over Dad's shoulder wriggles, emitting a mixture of childish sobs and canine pining. When we finally reach the yard, Dad flings open the shed doors and places the bag on the ground.

'I'm calling Mick to see where he is. Don't open that bag. You hear?'

'No,' I whisper. 'I swear we won't touch it.'

Dad leaves Mum and I alone with the wriggling bag. I was told Jamie was dead, savaged by wolves. Yet here we stand, listening to his cries filling the space.

I can't take it anymore. I walk towards the sack, expecting to hear Mum calling me back, but she doesn't utter a sound, so I continue, crouching on the ground, carefully untying the knot.

Two blue eyes flash within the darkness of the sack. Then he's out, darting to the nearest corner, where he huddles against the wall. Mum creeps towards him, tears falling down her cheeks. Her hand reaches out and she touches him.

'Oh, Jamie, it's really you.' She pulls him in to her arms. 'I'll never let anything happen to you again. You're safe now, forever. I promise, baby boy. I promise.'

Without hesitation, I run to them both and wrap my arms around my brother. His fur is musty and thick and his heartbeat pounds through his chest. It's beating just as hard and fast as mine.

‘What the hell?’ Dad’s voice booms through the shed and the three of us jump. Mum leaps up and glares at my father.

‘Don’t even start. This *is* Jamie. You better believe it. We need to get him to hospital. And the police. We need to—’

‘I don’t think we do,’ Dad says.

A car engine hums outside. Hurried footsteps approach the shed. Uncle Mick rushes through the door, bolting it firmly behind him.

‘They’re out there,’ he says, gasping. ‘They’ve hunted you down.’

‘Who is out there?’ I ask, clutching my brother. His arms curl around my back and his bony fingers press into my spine. It is the first time I have felt his embrace in two years. I used to push him away. He was just the annoying little toddler who followed me around everywhere, but now I never want him to let go.

Uncle Mick ignores my question. His wide eyes are fixed on Jamie. ‘Christ,’ he whispers. ‘There he is.’

The wind picks up outside. My uncle glances back towards the door. I grip Jamie tightly. It’s not just the sound of the wind moaning around the shed; there is something else out there. A sound I am all too familiar with. Every night, I lay in bed listening to the distant call of wolves, imagining Jamie out there with them; praying that he will be found alive one day.

As the noise intensifies, Jamie’s body stiffens and his eyes brighten. He pulls away from my arms and darts across the ground. He slams his body against the door and his skeletal frame bounces off the wood, landing in a crumpled heap. Within seconds, he’s up again, running to the door. His legs stretch into a standing position and he frantically scratches at the wood with his fingernails.

Mum’s screams reverberate throughout the shed. ‘Stop him! He’ll get out!’

I jump up and run towards him, pulling his hand away from the door. He turns and his eyes meet mine. His mouth opens. It looks as though a smile is forming, but then he bares his teeth—sharp gleaming incisors covered in saliva.

Uncle Mick grabs me by the shoulders, yanking me backwards and we tumble to the floor, hitting the cold, hard concrete. Dad rushes forward and grabs my hand, pulling me to my feet.

‘Get your hands off my son!’

‘You don’t want him to get bitten do you?’

I clutch my father's hand and stare at Jamie up against the door. 'Dad? What happened to him? Why is he like this?'

'The wolves must have looked after him, son. It's so cold out there that his body must have adapted, even grown fur.'

Uncle Mick throws back his head and laughs. 'You're full of crap. Tell the lad the truth.'

Vomit rises up my throat, coating my tongue. I swallow hard, forcing it back down.

'Is he a wolf-person?' I ask.

I first heard about the 'wolf people' from my friends at primary school. Creatures that live in the forest. Part human and part wolf. I believed it all when I was young, but as I grew older, I just thought it was a stupid story made up by adults to stop kids from wandering into the forest.

Dad's face pales. He looks into my eyes. 'No son. Don't pay any attention to Mick. He has issues.'

Uncle Mick laughs again and jabs his finger into my father's chest. 'I sure do have issues! I seem to remember you paying me a nice sum of money to keep those issues to myself.'

The two men fall silent as Jamie throws back his head and squeezes his eyes shut. A shriek rips from his lungs. It's long and painful, as though he is releasing every drop of misery from his tiny body.

'He wants to go,' Uncle Mick says. 'We let him out, or I'll let the wolves in. And that could get messy.'

Mum grabs my uncle by the arm. 'I can't let him go again. I just got him back.' She turns and screams at Dad. 'This is your fault!'

'My fault? Are you bloody serious?'

'You lost him. He was three years old. You should have been watching him.'

Without further warning, Uncle Mick unbolts the door and pushes it open, and Jamie rushes into the darkness. I release my father's hand and find myself running after him. Mum shrieks, but I keep going, stumbling through the snow. The icy wind hits my face. I can't let my brother disappear again.

Canine feet patter behind me. They pick up speed, gaining on me. Paws slam into my back, pushing the air from my lungs and winding me, as I tumble to the ground. The wolf's intense blue eyes stare into mine and its hot breath wafts over my face. For that brief second, as our eyes meet, I feel like I know this beast.

Then it snarls. Pointed teeth inch towards my face and I squeeze my eyes shut, bracing for pain. Terror surges through my body.

A gunshot fires through the night air. The wolf bolts, leaving me alone with snowflakes falling from the black sky.

My father's face appears above me. He flings his shotgun over his shoulder and scoops me up in his arms, carrying me back to the house. The warmth of the dwindling fire greets us as the door is pushed open. Mum rushes towards us, pulling me from Dad's arms. Her body shakes as she grips me. Moments later, Uncle Mick strides through the door with Jamie in his arms. Blood splatters onto the floor, dripping from my brother's leg.

'Dad! You shot him!' I scream.

'I was aiming for the wolf. I thought we were going to lose you,' Dad says gently.

Uncle Mick's hands and clothes are covered in blood. He strolls to the kitchen sink, rolls up his sleeves and plunges his hands under the running tap. Then, as he turns to face us, I shudder. His bare arms are covered in dense grey fur.

'I'm not hiding anymore,' he says. 'Secret's out.'

The room spins while the roaring voices of my uncle and my father merge into one, becoming nothing more than a deafening drone filling my head. Then, as if a blanket has been thrown over me, I'm plunged into darkness. The only sound is the rush of blood pulsing through my ears.

'Toby?'

My eyelids flicker open. Mum leans in and kisses me gently on the forehead. 'You passed out.'

I sit up and grab my mother's arms. 'What's happening?'

On the sofa, Uncle Mick wraps a bandage around Jamie's bloody leg. My brother lies motionless with his eyes closed and his fur-covered chest slowly rising and falling.

'Bullet just scratched him,' Uncle Mick says. 'A bit of rest and he'll be good to go.'

'Go where?'

'Out there, to his home.'

'But this is his home!'

Uncle Mick sighs deeply. 'Not anymore.'

The room is still spinning and I blink in attempt to focus on my father standing in the kitchen. It is the first time I have seen true fear in his eyes. He's never scared of anything, my Dad. But I see it now.

Uncle Mick ties the bandage and stands, facing Dad. ‘Do you want to tell Toby, or shall I?’ he says.

Dad glares at him. ‘This is not the time.’

Uncle Mick grins and turns towards me. ‘Well, looks like I’ll tell him then.’

I shrink into my mother’s arms, as his wide smile reveals a set of gleaming white teeth.

‘I was eight years old.’ he says. ‘Mucking around in the forest. Then I saw him and he saw me. I tried to run but had no chance. Thought he was going to kill me, but he just bit me once and then bolted. After that, I felt different. Saw shrinks, counsellors, the whole works. They said I had behavioural issues. Post-traumatic stress or some crap. Got put on all sorts of medication and then a few weeks later, fur sprouted everywhere. The family told everyone they were home-schooling me, but I spent my days locked away in the shed. I was just a kid. I was scared. No-one cared though.’

Dad shakes his head. ‘You were out of control.’

‘Yeah, well you had the good life, didn’t you, Bro? Two kids and a pretty wife. I had nothing. Well, until—’

‘You bit Jamie! You destroyed his life!’ Dad yells. ‘You turned him into... this.’

Uncle Mick laughs in my father’s face and crouches beside me. His bright blue eyes sparkle as they look into mine. ‘Yep, Jamie is just like me. I’m not alone anymore. The same cold blood runs through our veins.’

Playground stories of wolf-people whirl through my head. My little brother—what is he? Is he even human?

Uncle Mick continues. ‘That’s why your brother ran into the forest. When he started to turn, he had to go home—to his real family.’

Dad’s fist smashes into my uncle’s jaw sending him shooting across the floor. Blood drips from his mouth as he reaches for the table, pulling himself up.

‘Get out!’ Dad screams, pointing to the door.

‘Alright. But I’m taking Jamie.’

He stumbles to the sofa, scooping Jamie in his arms and slinging him over his shoulder.

‘No!’ Mum screams.

Dad’s doing nothing. He’s just standing there. Uncle Mick reaches the door. I can’t let this happen. I pull away from my mother’s arms and dart towards my uncle as he opens the



door. To my surprise, he calmly turns and greets me with warm smile, gently taking my hand in his.

‘You’re a good lad. We’ll see you soon.’

Then, without warning, he yanks my hand to his mouth. I try to pull back but it is too late; I yelp as razor-sharp teeth rip through my skin and excruciating pain jolts up my arm. He releases his grip and they’re gone, disappearing into the darkness. Mum and Dad rush to my side and I stand in the doorway, clutching my bleeding hand.

As the winter wind blows through the house, a freezing, tingling sensation creeps through my body, as if ice crystals are forming within my veins. A distant howl echoes through the valley.

They’re calling me.