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# The Hunt

Written by Tim J. Lebbon

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TIM J. LEBBON

# *The Hunt*

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*'Come what may, bad fortune is to be conquered by endurance.'*
Virgil

*'Run when you can, walk if you have to, crawl if you must; just never give up.'*
Dean Karnazes

# *Chapter One*

## *tiger*

When he wanted to run faster, Chris Sheen imagined being chased by a tiger. Sleek, stealthy, powerful, it pounded silently along the trail behind him, tail swishing at the clasping brambles and eyes focused on his back. He didn't risk a glance over his shoulder. There was no time for that. If he did his pace would slow, and maybe he'd trip over a tree root or a rock protruding from the uneven path. He'd go sprawling and the big cat would be upon him. All they'd find would be his GPS watch and perhaps one of his running shoes, bloodied and torn and still containing a foot.

He giggled. Sweat ran into his eyes and down his back. Mud was splattered up his legs from the newly ploughed field he'd run across a couple of miles back. Blood pulsed, his heart thudded fast and even, and he had never felt so good.

He loved running with the dawn. Out of the house while it was still dark, leaving Terri and the girls sleeping, he was through one small woodland and already running down towards the canal towpath by the time the sun set the hills alight. Sometimes he saw someone else on the canal, walking their dog or cycling to work, but more often than not he

was on his own. This morning he'd seen a buzzard in a field, sitting on a recent kill and staring around as if daring anyone to try for it. Once on the towpath a heron had taken off close by, startling him with its sheer size. He heard a woodpecker at work somewhere, scared ducks into the water with their ducklings, and he'd caught a brief glimpse of a kingfisher's neon beauty. This early morning world felt like his alone, and he revelled in it.

Now, close to the end of his run, the giggles came in again. It was a familiar feeling. The endorphins were flowing, his heart hammering, and it felt so bloody great to be alive that sometimes he whooped out loud, running through the woods towards home. He ran with assurance and style, flowing across the uneven ground and watching ahead for potential trip hazards. Spider web strands broke across his face, but he didn't mind. Once, he'd arrived home to find Terri in the kitchen, sleep-ruffled and clasping a warm mug of tea, and when he'd hugged her – ignoring her protestations at his sweat-soaked clothing and cold hands – she'd screeched at the sight of a spider crawling in his hair.

He leaped a stream, slipped, found his footing and ran on. He knew this was a good run, he could feel it, but when he glanced at his watch he saw that he was well on course for a personal best. It was one of his regular routes – through a small woodland on the other side of the village, along a country lane, up a steep hill to a local folly, back down a rocky trail to the canal towpath, then under several bridges until he entered the larger woodland that led back home. Twelve miles, and his best time so far was one hour fifty minutes. Not bad for cross country, and pretty good for a middle-aged former fat bastard. But today he was set to smash that record by five minutes.

It was almost eight o'clock, and he'd still be home in time to make sandwiches for Gemma and Megs to take to school.

He emerged from the woods and headed across the large field behind the village hall. He waved at an old man walking his dog, vaulted the fence instead of passing through the kissing gate, and crossed the village hall car park.

Half a mile now, and he put on a burst of speed to finish at a sprint. It felt so bloody good. When he'd hit forty he'd been thirty pounds overweight and unfit, but then everything had changed. A comment one day from Terri – *I love you cuddly* – had started a snowball effect of worry about his weight, unhappiness at his appearance, and concern for his kids. He wanted to see them grow up. He wanted to take his grandkids for long walks. Four years later he was fitter than he'd ever been, leaner, stronger. He'd tucked his first two marathons under his belt, and the year before he'd completed his first Ironman, with plans for more. The Chris of four years ago wouldn't recognise the Chris of today, and he couldn't deny a little smugness at that thought.

'Morning, Carol!' he shouted across the road. Their friend was dragging rubbish bags up her driveway, still wearing her dressing gown.

'Nutter!' she called back, waving. She was wildly overweight and never walked anywhere, even drove to the village shop. Chris was fond of her, but knew who the real nutter was.

There was a strange car parked at the end of his street, a suited man in the driver's seat talking into a Bluetooth headset. He caught Chris's eye then looked away, still talking. Smooth-looking bastard. Salesman, maybe. Chris hoped the guy didn't knock at his door, but the 'No Cold Callers' sign didn't deter most. He was an architect, he

worked from his home studio, and nothing annoyed him more than people disturbing him to try to sell him things on his doorstep.

Their house came into view. One more injection of power, swing those arms forward and back, watch the style, land on mid-foot and sweep forward, and . . . hit the watch.

Chris looked at his time and muttered a delighted 'Yes!' Terri wouldn't really care that he'd beaten his best time by almost six minutes. He'd tell her anyway.

Their bedroom curtains were still drawn. That was weird, because Terri had to leave for work in less than half an hour. Maybe she'd missed the alarm, although the girls foraging downstairs for breakfast and arguing over what to watch on TV should have woken her.

Panting heavily, already feeling the burn settling into his muscles, he plucked the front door key from his pocket and slipped it into the lock. He needed a pint of water and a bowl of cereal and fruit. But for another few seconds he breathed in the peace and quiet, readying himself for the pre-school chaos inside.

As he pushed the door open he already knew that something was different. *No, not different*, he thought. *Wrong. Something's wrong.*

'Terri?' he called, closing the door behind him. 'Gemma? Megs?' Nothing. No angry voices as his daughters bickered. No tired admonishments as Terri tried to get ready for work while the girls dressed for school. No sound of the shower running or perfumed scents on the air. The TV in the living room was muted, there was no music from upstairs, and the alarm on Terri's phone beside the bed must have been turned off. One of the joys of going out early was that he didn't have to wake up to One Direction

singing one of their bland songs. Though Terri said she liked waking to blandness: it meant the day could only get better.

And there was something else. Something he couldn't quite place, apart from the unnatural silence, the stillness.

'Terri?' Four steps and he could look into the living room. The TV was off. There was no breakfast stuff scattered around. Usually the girls left their bowls for someone else to clear up, and lately he and Terri had been leaving them until after school, making the girls clear away their mess from the morning. Sometimes, anyway. More often than not he'd pick them up during the day, on his way through from his studio to the kitchen to throw a salad together for lunch. After today's run he'd probably treat himself to something more substantial, maybe some cheese on toast or a bacon bagel with . . .

One of Terri's slippers was on the floor by the doorway into their large kitchen-diner. Just one of them, lying abandoned on its side. So she'd been downstairs, at least.

'Hello?' No answer. They were hiding from him, of course, waiting to pounce when he climbed the stairs. But that certainty couldn't prevent the stab of fear that pierced his chest and ran cold down his spine as he started up. *It's not like Terri*, he thought. *Me, yeah, I'll jump out of cupboards and lark around, scare the kids. But not her.* 'Okay, I'm sweating more than usual, and the first person I find gets a really big hug.'

No giggles. No sounds of girls struggling further beneath beds or into wardrobes. The boiler ticked as it heated water, and that was all. The only noise in this usually bustling family home.

Chris ran up the last few stairs and checked the girls'

bedrooms. They were empty, messy as usual, clothes strewn about. Gemma was almost fifteen now, and amongst the books and DVD cases were make-up packaging and teen magazines. Megs was nine. She had more stuffed toys than was probably necessary, and Chris waded into her room, shifting them aside with his muddy trainers. *Terri'll kill me for not taking them off*, he thought, but right then he didn't care. Something was wrong, and every time he breathed . . .

He could smell coffee. It had been rich on the air when he'd opened the front door, and it was only now that he acknowledged the scent. Terri hated coffee. And she'd never have made some ready for him because she knew he liked it hot, fresh, and brewed by his own hand.

He darted along the landing to their room. Empty, bedclothes dragged down onto the floor. Terri's phone was on the carpet beside the bed. As if it had been knocked from the bedside table.

'Terri!' Chris shouted, shocked at the note of panic in his voice. For an endless moment he didn't know which way to turn, what to do. Grab her phone and call the police? And tell them what? Go back downstairs, then, check out the kitchen-diner where they were probably hiding, or maybe just sitting down having a quiet breakfast. Maybe he'd been so pumped up when he'd come in that he hadn't heard them answer, and now they'd be frowning at each other with jam on their lips, Terri rolling her eyes and the girls laughing as their dad staggered into the kitchen, a sweat-soaked wreck who'd almost run himself into the ground.

Yeah.

But when he glanced into the large family bathroom and

saw the shower curtain on the floor, its plastic hooks strewn across the tiles along with scattered pot pourri, bath dry but for the splash of blood across one side and the smear across the wall beside the shower head, he knew that everything had changed.

His vision and senses became focused, sharpened by fear for his family and the surrealness of this moment. He saw things he might not have otherwise noticed. The bathroom window was closed, and Terri always opened it first thing in the morning. Megs' sleep teddy – the one cuddly toy she couldn't get into bed without – was propped behind the bathroom door on the laundry basket. The shower power supply was on but the curtain, splayed across the floor with one end up on the toilet seat, was dry.

Blood.

Gemma tried shaving her legs, cut herself. Terri panicked, took her to hospital. But that just didn't add up. She'd have taken her phone, and he always took his mobile when he went for a run, *always*! He frantically dug it from his waist bag and checked, but there were no missed calls, no emails.

Breathing heavier now, he smelled coffee again.

He ran downstairs, trying to blink away the image of blood. Splashed on the bath. Smeared on the wall, as if someone had it on their hand, reaching for purchase as they fell from the bath (or were pulled, maybe they were *pulled*) and took the shower curtain with them.

He ran past the still-empty living room and barged the kitchen door aside. It struck the door stop and bounced back at him, and he shoved it open again, blocking it with his foot, not making any sense of what he saw, because what

he'd expected to see was his family sitting at the small table eating breakfast, Gemma perhaps with a bandage on her hand and looking sorry for herself.

Coffee. Terri hated coffee.

There was a man leaning casually against a kitchen cupboard beside the back door. The door was ajar, a small fingerprint of blood on the UPVC jamb. The man was holding a mug, the one from a Yorkie Easter egg that Chris's mum still insisted on buying him every Easter, much to his secret delight. The man watched Chris while taking another long sip of coffee. He raised his eyebrows in greeting.

'Who are you?' Chris asked.

The man lowered the mug and swallowed. 'Good coffee. Ethiopian. You ever been there?'

'No, I . . . who *are* you?'

The stranger put the mug on the worktop beside him and picked up a phone. He wore a nice polo shirt, chinos, well-polished boots. He reminded Chris of the guy he'd seen sitting in the car at the end of the street, and that connection suddenly seemed all too real.

'Where are my family? What are you doing here?' Chris's attention kept flitting to the open back door, that dab of blood. He was filled with a sudden, utter dread. His legs felt weak. His bladder relaxed.

The man looked at his watch, glanced at the phone screen, and sighed. 'Stay in the house. Don't go out. Don't call the police, or your wife and children will be executed. I'll be in touch.' Then he turned and opened the back door.

'Wait!' Chris said, darting across the kitchen for the man, reaching, fingertips brushing the fine cotton of his polo shirt before the intruder turned fluidly and stood, motionless. He stared at Chris, his eyes empty, face blank and terrifying.

'I'll be in touch,' he said again. He exuded danger in waves. Chris took one step back, and the man left and closed the back door behind him.

Terrified, shaking, alone, Chris waited for whatever might come next.

# *Chapter Two*

## *chosen*

Rose screamed herself awake, sprang upright on the uncomfortable bed and pressed one hand against her chest, feeling her thundering heart and assuring herself that she was still alive. Sweat had dampened her vest and underclothes. She'd kicked the blanket off during the night. The musty confines of the caravan were sliced by sheets of dawn sunlight shining through broken blinds, and birds sang cheerfully outside, as if her husband and three children had never been tied up and slaughtered in some dark, dank basement.

The familiar flood of reality rushed in, and Rose groaned at the awfulness of it all. Sometimes in sleep there was escape, and occasionally in dreams she enjoyed some form of vicarious peace. But not this past night. The memory of what she had found was so vivid and fresh that it was like discovering the scene all over again. Four years had passed, but most nights she found her dead family afresh.

Already the nightmare was dissipating, leaving brash images scorched into her memory. Adam, his eyes as wide and empty as the vicious gash in his throat. And her three children – Molly, Isaac, Alex – lying dead where she had not

been able to protect them, hold them, whisper motherly words into their ears. She always remembered that, however hard she tried to forget.

She used the cramped toilet and dressed quickly, pausing now and then to glance from the windows. New habits persisted. It was dangerous to ever believe herself safe.

Outside, all was peaceful. The field where her caravan was parked remained empty right now – the farmer said he would be introducing some sheep in the next few weeks – and the grass was long, shimmering slightly in the morning breeze, jewelled with dew. The windows gave her good views in each direction, and she'd be able to see anyone approaching. Down the sloping field was the farm, still and silent this early in the morning. East lay the orchard, fruit-heavy trees dipping low limbs across the landscape. And to the north, a family of foxes played close to the hedge bordering the field and a woodland beyond, young cubs leaping, rolling, snapping at each other like puppies. She was always pleased to see them. If someone was close by, the foxes wouldn't be anywhere in sight.

Rose went through her morning exercise routine. One hundred press-ups, sit-ups and crunches, along with chin-ups, planks, and squats. Her body had grown lithe and lean. The exertion kick-fired her metabolism and got her blood pumping, and the distraction steered her away from her horrible dreams. For a time, at least.

After eating a breakfast of fruit and yoghurt she pulled the pistol from beneath the mattress and tucked it into her belt.

She brewed coffee and switched on her laptop. The caravan was small and basic but suited her needs perfectly. She'd bought a new fridge and decent bedding, but the van's

outside was as mouldy and worn-looking as when she'd first seen it. Five hundred pounds and it was hers. The farmer took a chunk of cash from her each week for ground rent and silence, and he was happy to ask no questions. That was fine. She never stayed in one place for more than a few weeks.

Drinking strong coffee, humming quietly, she started scanning her usual news sites. But the memory of her nightmare was strong. She closed her eyes and breathed in coffee fumes, because every time she thought of her family the grief was rich, deep, and sometimes crippling. She dreaded forgetting them, though sometimes remembering was almost too much.

But her dreams and memories fed her fury. She knew that her current existence was a form of self-imposed limbo, and everything she did now would lead to an eventual resolution. Perhaps then she could lay her nightmares to rest, and true grieving could begin.

There was no news that drew her attention today. The usual political infighting, celebrity inconsequentialities, faraway conflicts. She looked for murders or unexplained deaths. She sought news on kidnappings and shootings, unidentified bodies found strangely mutilated in city or countryside. Anything that might lead to the Trail.

As usual, nothing.

But something felt different today. Her nightmare clung on, and even though she had found nothing obvious on the net, perhaps today was the day to check again.

Rose gulped down the rest of her coffee in one and then opened a new browsing window.

She didn't like doing this too often. She accessed the net via a proxy server in London, had a rolling defence protocol

that would lock her out at the first sign of being tracked, used no identifying markers or traceable elements, yet she knew that they had far more expertise at their disposal than her. Rose liked to amuse herself by thinking about some of the online contacts she'd made and how much stuff she had access to that would give the heads of the CIA and MI5 panic attacks. But accessing the Trail's own network was like dipping her toe into a river of alligators. It was only so long before she was noticed and they came for her.

She would only allow that to happen on her own terms.

She slipped by several firewalls and surfed communications she could not yet decipher. It was pretty standard traffic that she'd seen before, so she withdrew and re-entered under another address, creating an avatar that would easily be mistaken as a particularly intrusive trollbot, if anyone noticed it at all. Most trollbots' aims were to spread viruses or collect information. Hers was simply to observe. She'd given it a variety of source links which flickered and rolled every three seconds – a sex-drug site; a Nigerian billionaire with money to get out of the country; a guaranteed tip to increase cock size. She hoped that, draped in the paraphernalia of a million other trolls, hers was all but invisible.

While her laptop worked, she made more coffee. It was her one vice, and had been for three years.

For almost a year after escaping the Trail and finding Adam and her children murdered, she'd drowned herself deep in London's underworld. Her first thought had been to go to the police, but even then the shadow of the Trail remained over her, and the promises of harm they had levelled against her extended family and friends had felt even more real. They had proven themselves sickeningly brutal.

Then came the revelation that she was wanted for her

family's slaying. In a way, that was the worst abuse of all – the way they had framed her, made a mockery of her love and grief. A madness had taken her. A blazing fury and a smothering grief. It was incomprehensible how quickly she had changed from a family woman with a good job and a nice house to . . . someone else. And so she had cut her hair, dyed what was left, and submerged herself in the chaos of the capital. It was ironic that she went to so much effort disguising herself when in truth she was already lost.

Those shadowy places were more about the people than the locations – lost, dispossessed, cast adrift by society, or fallen by the wayside of their own volition. No one had seemed interested in her, and she had taken notice of no one. Occasionally she worried about being recognised, though in truth grief had changed her more than a haircut and new clothes ever could. She was a hollow person, and her body projected that physically. Sunken cheeks, stick-like limbs, deep eyes like pools of dark ink.

London had been an ideal place to hide, and to drink. Every day, every night, alcohol absorbed and obsessed her, becoming her whole world. When the memories threatened to surface she drank some more to smother them, and if she ever approached sobriety, another bottle of cheap vodka swept her away again. Abandoned buildings and squats had provided places for her to sleep, and if in a drunken haze she lost her way, there were always the shadowy spaces beneath bridges or in rubbish-strewn alleyways. She was one woman in a city whose lifeblood was anonymity, and time and place lost all meaning. The moment of change when she'd found her family was a deep, wide chasm in her life. Sometimes she stood on the edge and tried to look back,

but it was too far to see clearly. So she remained on the other side, wallowing in the guilt of survival and letting alcohol smother her across this new, barren land.

Seeing a member of the Trail had changed everything.

Rose had stumbled into the woman outside the Apollo Theatre one rainy, cold November evening. She'd been wandering through Soho searching for one of her familiar sleeping places, a deserted, boarded-up pub accessed through a broken back window. Many of the dispossessed knew that place. It stank of piss and booze, echoed with drug-fuelled mumblings and occasional cries of wretchedness, pleasure or pain. But that night Rose's befuddled sense of direction had failed her, and she'd emerged into the bright lights and bustle of Shaftesbury Avenue.

The lights had been blinding. Disorientated, she'd turned to make her way back into the shadows. People had parted to let her by, protecting themselves with space and muttered words of distaste. All but this woman. Rose had walked right into her, and many times since she'd wondered whether it had been orchestrated. Had the woman recognised her in that instant and engineered their collision? Had she been looking for her?

The last time Rose had seen her, she'd been standing beside a Range Rover somewhere in London's Docklands smiling broadly as a man told Rose to run.

As the heat of recognition grew quickly in Rose's mind, she saw that it had already settled in the woman's eyes. *Grin*, Rose thought, because that's how she had thought of the woman since that first meeting, in nightmares and booze-fuelled fantasies of revenge. *Grin, you're Grin, and I'll wipe that name from your face.*

Grin was smartly dressed, short and thin, strong. Her

auburn hair was cut in an attractive bob, her skin smooth and relatively unlined even though she was perhaps fifty years old. She looked *nice*, like anyone's mother. But Rose knew her secret.

Grin had smiled and reached slowly, casually into her raincoat pocket.

Rose still had no idea how she had reacted so quickly. Her hand snapped out, fingers closing around the object in Grin's hand, snatching, and then she ran. Losing herself in those rainswept streets had been easy, and the shouts and pursuit she'd expected never came.

The phone had worked for seven minutes before its connection was cancelled. In that time, she had hidden away and managed to scratch two numbers into her arm with a shard of broken glass.

Then she had ditched the phone in a trash-filled alley and fled. She'd somehow gathered herself, suffering a terrible couple of days of relative sobriety. She'd retrieved the necessary documentation and money she'd once hidden, at the time barely believing she would ever use it again. Italy was somewhere Adam had always wanted to visit with their kids, and it had seemed far enough away from London, remote enough, to lose herself once again.

That chance meeting in a city of millions had allowed the dormant seed of an idea to sprout. Revenge. And later, in the Italian heat, alcohol hiding her once more, she'd traced and retraced those healing scars on her forearm. Numbers that might lead to something else, like a code to discovery.

But even in Italy she had not been able to drag herself from the depths. She'd tried again and again, spending a day sobering up, but quickly following those brief moments of sick reality with long periods of even heavier drinking

and deeper oblivion. She so wanted to find some way back. She dreamed of Grin's face opening beneath her pounding fists, a heavy rock, a wielded knife. But even approaching reality allowed the true, awful memories to flood back in.

She had been unable to find the strength to handle that. Not until Holt.

The laptop chimed.

Rose poured a new mug of strong coffee and sat down at the small table. Lifting the mug to her lips, she paused and stared down at the screen.

One of the inboxes she monitored had received a new email. It was only the fifth time in three years that such a mail had been sent and received. It was still marked in bold. Unread.

'They've chosen another one.' She sat back for a moment, stunned, chilled even through the rush of warm coffee. She knew that if she opened this email and read it, and they discovered it had been seen and read, everything might fall apart. The Trail would abandon their systems and networks and build again from the ground up, and she would lose everything she'd been working on, and hoping for, since bringing herself back to the world.

But the content of this email *was* everything. She could open it, screen-grab it, and mark it as unread again in a matter of moments.

She did not hesitate for a second before risking it all.