

HUNTED

Book 2 of the Hybrid series

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Nick

Prologue

Light creeps across the woodland floor as a new day dawns, painting a grisly scene amidst the natural beauty of the bed of autumn leaves – your final resting place. Blood seems so bright in the early morning sun, ruined flesh glistening wetly. Flies crawl across pale skin, feeding and laying their eggs in every suitable crevice available to them. The insects venture inside your ears and your mouth, and those gaping holes of blood and gore where once your eyes resided, before fangs obliterated them.

Reduced to no more than this lump of mutilated flesh and bone, no one will recognise you for who you were, not by sight alone. Your limbs lay sprawled, one arm bitten off at the elbow, ripped tendons, ligaments and flesh hanging from the bloody stump like gruesome rags. Chalky white bone, streaked with red, lies bare in places where chunks of meat have been ripped away, and your torso is completely torn open, leaving nothing but an empty cavity, many of your vital organs gone, others strewn around and half eaten. And around that bloodied mask that was once your face, brains lie like a ghastly halo, where they oozed out from the puncture marks in your skull.

Somewhere nearby a chilling howl sounds from a bloodied muzzle, turning to a human cry of anguish. You might have been dragged through the black veil of death, but it seems there is more for you than darkness on the other side after all. Your presence lingers on in this earthly plane, still aware of the world but powerless to do anything to help shape it.

Those loathsome scavengers feasting on the decay suddenly buzz away, fear overriding hunger. Birds singing to the early morning fall silent, and rodents seek refuge in the undergrowth. They know better than to linger in the presence of the unnatural beast invading their habitat, instincts saving them where thoughts failed you.

And here I stand over your mortal remains, your blood staining my bare flesh. Underneath the blood and dirt my skin remains as flawless and unmarred as the day I was born, despite everything my body's been through over the years. And yet for all the healing capabilities of my curse, I still carry the scars,

invisible to the naked eye but they mark me nevertheless. And just as scarred flesh from old physical wounds can still throb years later, so too do I feel the ache of these mental wounds, all the more potent whenever I must walk alone. So why take your life when my heart yearns so greatly for companionship? I began my tale out of the need to share the burden of this pain I carry, the weight of all the deaths surrounding me that still hangs over me even now. Killing you only added to the weight of my burden, undoing any relief I might have found in the telling.

I could blame the hunger of course, or the call of the moon robbing me of my senses. But to do so would be a lie. In truth I'm no more than a killer, a monster born of humanity but also driven by a wolf's hunger for raw flesh. Most people don't know what it is to truly dwell in the darkness, but that has been my reality for some time now. The darkness at the heart of the human side to my nature has ruled me for so long, I don't think I could pull myself back out, even if I was willing to try. And to drag others into the darkness has become all I know. So it was back then, early in my lycanthropy, and so it is now.

Did you pity me when you first heard how my life was ripped from me by this curse, I wonder? Did you feel sorry for this poor, wretched creature, condemned to prey on those around him, before I crushed that pity, along with all your other thoughts and feelings, your very life. And does it now bring you pleasure to hear of my suffering? I've proven myself to be the monster beyond a doubt now, after all. Perhaps I've earned your hatred. That is, if there is anything left of you to hate. Are you truly still with me now, or am I merely imagining this presence I sense? No matter. I promised to continue my tale after the full moon, so continue it I shall. If it brings you some form of enjoyment to hear of my pain then it's the least I can do in return for the life I stole from you to fuel my own cursed existence. And if you are no more than another product of my guilty conscience, perhaps voicing some more of the pain I carry will bring some relief again, no matter how temporary. You may not really be here this time, there may be no one listening, but I want to continue.

Very well then. We began in the year 2003, on my final day as a human, though I struggled through my last year of high school in an attempt to carry on in the remnants of my life before the curse. Now we go back to where I left off in 2004, just after I'd chosen to leave the human world behind, when a new struggle was only just beginning.

Chapter One – A Harsh Reality

Blood pooled at my feet, seeping into the soil, the last remnants of life from my latest kill. He fell to the ground and another human took his place. The sounds of battle filled the night, gunfire ringing in my ears, the heavy thud of sword through bone, and the wet, tearing sounds of flesh being ripped apart.

Corpses littered the battlefield, some rising as zombies, others never to rise again. Zombies – they were everywhere. Moving through the battle in a cascade of maggots, each in various stages of decay. The new dead walked almost like humans. The older ones limped, their muscles stiff and almost useless. Some were reduced to skeletons, Lady Sarah's power the only thing binding the bones together. Some had died in the last world war, their legs long since blown off. They dragged themselves along with their hands. Some groaned. Others were silent, their vocal cords rotted away years ago. Few of them were whole, but they didn't need much to kill. One of them even had a head missing, but it seemed to be doing well enough without it. They pulled their victims apart. Some of them tore through flesh and bone with their teeth. And they were literally unstoppable. Bullets tore holes in them, blades hacked them to pieces, and still they carried on their relentless attacks. Most of them didn't even bleed. The freshly dead did, but there was no clotting, no healing, not like the living. Of all the undead, they were the closest to being truly dead.

Another human came at me with a sword. Clawed hands shredded his skin and blood poured, my fur soaked with it. Then a zombie crawled towards me, dragging its useless legs behind it because the nerves had been torn out at the base of the spine. A short length of intestine trailed behind it, the rest having been cut away after it had served its purpose as rope to bind her. It was a woman once, barely recognisable now. The face was a bloody mask, nose broken, ears missing, eyes long gone, save for the remnants of jelly like substance clinging to her cheeks. The flesh around the jaws had been completely torn off, giving her a

permanent skeletal grin. There wasn't an inch of her body that had been left untouched.

Other zombies lurched towards me. I suddenly found myself surrounded. But something was wrong, we were supposed to be on the same side. The zombie of the tortured woman latched onto my leg and bit down hard enough to draw blood. A scream tore from my throat as a second zombie sunk its teeth into my shoulder. I tried to fight them off but it was no use, they were too strong for me. I tore at the zombie on my shoulder with human hands, trying to pry its jaws off me. But that wasn't right either, I didn't remember transforming back to human...

A werewolf loomed over me, blood on its jaws and death in its eyes. I was no longer one of the undead, just a human again, body frail with mortality. The zombies ripped me apart in seconds. Like piranhas, they stripped me to the bone. A last dying scream tore from my throat, death drawing nearer. And then came the sound of real enemies somewhere on the edge of consciousness, beyond the nightmare, and I fought my way back to the waking world.

Lady Sarah was already alert beside me, her senses focussed on the group of Slayers creeping towards us. They were stealthy for humans but for all their training and technology, it was no match for our supernatural sight, hearing and smell. It had been only three nights since the battle in my hometown, in which we'd defeated the force there. I hadn't expected them to send more so quickly, or for them to find us so soon after leaving the area, but no matter how they'd located us, the fact remained we had become the hunted.

Of all the deaths I'd caused in that fight, only one weighed on my conscience. For the blood ties and the bonds of family are difficult to break, and on some level I supposed I had loved my Dad, though such emotions had been hard to find in my heart towards the end, once my rage had broken free and the anger had consumed me. To say I grieved for him would not be entirely accurate but in the aftermath of the battle, once my rage had subsided, there were the stirrings of guilt such as I had not felt in months. What troubled my conscience the most was the

thought of the destruction I had wrought on the lives of my Mum and my sister, Amy. In losing both me and my father that night their world had surely been left in ruins, by my own hand. It pained me to think of the heartbreak I must have caused them, whenever I was given the chance to dwell on it.

I rose beside the vampire, stiff and aching from sleeping on the hard floor. She relied on me to watch over her during the daylight hours when she was at her most vulnerable, and I had been allowed a few hours of rest while she watched over me in return. But sleep had not been easy since the curse of my lycanthropy had awoken nightly horrors to plague me every time I closed my eyes, and sleeping rough had only added to my problems with insomnia. I was not adjusting well to the new way of life somewhere between the world of man and nature, neither of which we could ever belong to. Nothing had been the same since I'd been bitten roughly a year ago, and day by day I'd slowly lost my humanity until I knew I could live among humans no more. The battle had brought with it the final realisation that I had to leave my old life behind and move on, or risk hurting my remaining loved ones. But that was proving to be more of a challenge than I'd expected, as it had been all I'd known prior to this new, harsh lifestyle I'd suddenly found myself in. After years of living in the world of modern human comforts, it was something of a shock to the system to be without all that which most people take for granted.

As well as missing the comfort of my bed, I found myself longing for a shower more than my teenage, human self would ever have anticipated. There had been no time to wash since the battle and my body was covered in dried blood and filth, as well as my own grease and sweat. And while I had become accustomed to living with hunger when I'd been captured and starved by the Slayers, it was already becoming a constant sensation which only added to my discomfort. Lady Sarah had promised to teach me how to survive in the shadows, and the first lesson had been to hunt only small prey which would attract less attention, or to scavenge when possible. But this meant I'd not been permitted to eat my fill since before the battle and such small morsels as rabbits and birds could only ever take the edge

off the hunger. I needed far more meat to satiate it and as I turned my attention to the Slayers, I watched them ravenously. I also felt a sense of hatred, still blaming them in part for bringing my human life to an end, and I let it awaken my anger, constantly smouldering within the darkest recesses of my very being. A growl rumbled deep in my throat and I bared my teeth as I readied myself to fight.

“No, Nick,” Lady Sarah whispered.

“Why? There’s only a handful of them,” I said.

“No, we must choose our fights carefully if we are to win this war.”

I ignored her and let the transformation take hold, wanting to revel in the destructive power of my lupine body once more. I hungered but it was no longer the mere craving for human flesh that drove me. No, I thirsted for blood and hungered for death, for slaughter. I had developed a need to kill, born of the rage and bloodlust awoken by the curse, all the more potent for the waxing moon overhead which would soon reach its fullest. In fighting the Slayers I could indulge my dark desires, but it was more than that. I embraced my rage because it kept the guilt and the pain at bay, and I felt I needed to lose myself in the bloodlust to avoid falling back into the dark pit of despair and depression I’d been in for the winter months following my friend Fiona’s death.

“Foolish boy!” Lady Sarah hissed. “Do you not recognise the spellcaster from three nights past? It is a fight we cannot win.”

“Don’t treat me like some mortal kid anymore,” I snarled, but suddenly my skin felt as if it was burning with the memory of the witch I’d faced in battle who had nearly ended my life, if Lady Sarah hadn’t been there to save me. Much as I hated to admit it, she was right. The spellcasters could easily have been the end of the army we’d gathered for that fight, and between their power and the guns we would face from the mortal Slayers, the two of us alone couldn’t hope to defeat them.

“There is no shame in tactical retreat,” she said in a gentler tone in an attempt to soothe me, aware that arguing could cost us our lives.

“Tactical retreat,” I snorted. “Call it what you want, it’s still running.”

But I let my anger burn back down to the embers deep within, though I didn’t reverse the few changes that had already begun, intending to take the transformation all the way to my faster wolf form.

“There’s no time,” Lady Sarah said. “We have to go, now!”

I had no choice but to run with the vampire in human form, unable to keep the transformation up whilst moving. It was too painful and too awkward to run on shifting flesh and bone.

Even in human form, I was still faster than any mortal, though I would have had no hope of keeping pace with the vampire if she’d run at full sprint. She let me set the pace and ran effortlessly beside me, graceful and agile as only we paranormal predators could be. Within minutes we had covered enough of a distance to be safely out of range of the group of would-be hunters – the mortals and their guns at any rate. I still had much to learn about the supernatural world I’d been dragged into and I could only guess at the rules of witchcraft. Were there any limitations on spells over a distance? If it was as easy as chanting an incantation to strike down enemies from anywhere on the planet then they would have surely killed us already, so I had to assume there was some kind of a range on witchcraft as well, but what that range was perhaps only the witches and warlocks themselves knew. From the look of determination on Lady Sarah’s face, it seemed she didn’t plan on stopping until we’d put a few hundred miles between us and the spellcaster, so I had to assume the warlock’s power was still a threat over quite some distance. It seemed we would need to spend the remainder of the night on the run, if we were to rest safely through the daylight hours.

“Wait,” I growled, coming to a stop and scenting the air. “Don’t you smell that?”

“Fire,” the vampire hissed.

“Over there,” I pointed. The unmistakable scent of smoke was thick and unpleasant to my sensitive nose, and as we

watched, the faint glow of flames could be seen creeping through the darkness. “Coincidence?”

“We can’t take that chance. If it is the work of witchcraft it could be our undoing. Come, this way.”

“Wait,” I repeated. “There’s another group of Slayers closing in. It’s a trap; they want us to keep running so they can catch us between the fire and their guns.”

“Then we must keep going towards the flames and hope we can outrun the blaze before it spreads too far round.”

“Fuck that, we need to fight our way out!”

“If we stand and fight we will die,” she argued.

“And since when has running into a trap ever been a good idea? If we keep going they’ll kill us. If we fight we have a chance to escape, and at least if we do die we can take some of them down with us. What are you so afraid of?”

“I fear nothing,” she hissed. “But I have not survived all these centuries by being reckless.”

“Fine, you keep running,” I snarled. “I’m staying to face them.”

Without waiting for any further response from the vampire, I let my anger rise once more, my blood boiling as it coursed through my veins. There was a savage joy as the feral power of my lupine nature surged through my body, all vestiges of the human weaknesses falling prey to the might of the predatory wolfish features taking hold. But there was no time to take it all the way to wolf form, so I chose to fight in the hybrid form I’d first been trapped in by mistake one cold December night, but had since grown to enjoy.

Where not so long ago there’d been horror at the agonising sensation of my body becoming monstrous, I now embraced the painful feeling of my face stretching out into a muzzle, teeth blunt and pathetic growing into natural weapons to rip and tear the flesh from my enemies. The sound of the approaching Slayers was suddenly sharper as my ears became pointed and slithered up to the top of my head, as did their scent to my superior canine nose. The smell of the smoke was almost unbearable and somewhere within my mind I felt the wolf’s instinctive response to flee. But my rage was stronger than the

animal fear the fire invoked in the lupine half of my mind, and as ever my bloodlust rose with it, bringing the overwhelming need to hunt and kill. My hunger also intensified and with an excited howl I bounded forward to meet the Slayers in battle once more, running on all fours despite my body remaining mostly humanoid. As well as my lupine head, my spine had also elongated to form a tail and my hands were now clawed, and I'd let my fur burst forth from my skin, forming my pelt which resembled that of a natural timber wolf. But that was as far as I took the change for the coming battle. There was as much fun to be had in fighting in this hybrid form as there was when fully wolf, and it meant I could swipe with my clawed hands like a cat as well as savaging with my fangs.

The Slayers were quick to react once I leapt into view, opening fire in an attempt to stop me before I could get close enough to kill any of them. Two came dangerously close to hitting their mark, one bullet nicking my ear and the other thudding into my chest, just missing my heart. The pain was enough to rival that of the transformation, my ear stinging and gushing blood, my chest throbbing. I let it fuel the rage and kept going, not even slowing when another bullet passed clean through my left bicep or when a fourth grazed my right shoulder blade. Then I was on the first of the humans and all he could do was scream as his gun clicked empty, my fangs ripping his throat out in a spray of blood and gore. I left him dying and turned to face a woman just as she was about to shoot through my skull. At point blank range I would never have stood a chance if she'd succeeded in squeezing off the shot. But I was too fast for her, ducking so quickly she couldn't track my movement with the gun and grabbing her leg with my bloodied muzzle.

Fresh blood oozed out as my jaws clamped down, staining my fangs and matting my fur. I lost myself in the bloodlust, the world reduced to a red haze that centred round the frantically beating heart of my prey and the blood pumping from her ruined calf where I savaged the flesh with wild abandon. I was only vaguely aware of more bullets flying through the darkness as I pulled the woman's leg out from under her, causing her to fall heavily on her back. With a whimper she tried to pull herself

backwards and away from my bestial fury but I was on her once more, digging my claws into her chest and ripping it open, greedily burying my snout into the feast I'd unlocked within.

The heart was the choicest of the organs I'd laid bare, and it brought a sense of primal ecstasy to feel it beating between my fangs, my tongue bathed in her blood, so rich and juicy. With a jerk of my head I ripped it free of its tubes, more blood splattering my body and the earth around us, and gushing into the cavity I'd created in the woman's chest. I felt a dark pleasure as the organ grew still in my mouth, another life ended, and gulped my prize down. My hunger wanted more flesh but the bloodlust overrode it, causing me to rise from my latest victim and take another. It was only then I realised Lady Sarah had entered the fray, which was probably the only reason I was still alive. I'd been so intent on my kill, the other Slayers could've easily put a bullet in my brain while I tore into her soft flesh. But the vampire had kept them busy, the gunfire aimed in her direction while I'd been so lost in my bloodlust to take any notice.

I ripped a second woman apart while Lady Sarah kept the rest engaged, rising again to see one of the Slayers stood apart from the rest. He was older than most of their recruits I'd come across, grizzled and scarred like a soldier who'd seen too much of battle, his eyes the cold grey of winter skies. It seemed he too believed in 'tactical retreat', but there was no sense of panic like most other Slayers I'd encountered in the past when I'd driven them to flee. He merely backed away slowly, keeping his gun trained on me but saving his bullets. I snarled and took a step forward, meaning to end his life as brutally as the other three I'd killed, but Lady Sarah had just dispatched the last of her opponents and she grabbed my arm to pull me back.

Roaring angrily I turned to her, but her own anger had awoken and much as I hated to admit it, I was no match for a vampire. For all the power the curse granted me, it was still not the equal of the vampiric power Lady Sarah wielded.

"Control yourself!" she hissed. "The other group are catching up. If we give the warlock chance to reel off an incantation we're both doomed. Let him go."

I roared again but did as I was told, turning my attention back to the body that lay at my feet and crouching back over my kill. There was still plenty of meat to be had, and as I wolfed down a couple more mouthfuls, the bloodlust and the rage began to drain back into the abyss where once my soul had been, before the curse had robbed me of it. My anger and my need to kill seemed to be all that were left to me, poor replacements though they were, and it was only when I embraced them did I feel truly alive.

“Nick, there is no time! Take your full wolf form now, before they draw any closer, but hurry. We must make haste before the warlock has chance to ensnare either of us in a spell.”

Feeding seemed like a much more valuable use of the time we had, but without my rage to fuel me I became aware of the pain from the bullet wounds I’d sustained when I’d initially charged into battle. I’d been bleeding heavily and I suddenly felt the weakness brought on by loss of blood. Hungry as I was, the transformation would heal the damage and it would allow us to cover more ground once I’d recovered my strength and could run swifter as a full wolf. Feeding would have to wait.

As I let the change take hold once more, I felt my strength returning as the wounds closed, the bullet that had lodged in my chest being forced out by the newly formed flesh. It fell to the ground with a metallic clatter, no more than a small lump of bloodied metal, yet if it had hit me just another inch to the left and successfully passed through my heart it would have been the end of me. Maybe I was growing too reckless, but that thought brought me no shame – indulging the bloodlust had felt too good.

The initial feeling of strength faded as the transformation completed, only to be replaced by a wave of weariness and renewed hunger. I wrestled with my instincts, the scent of all the fresh meat almost overpowering, but it was only the vampire’s presence that kept me in check. I knew she intended to teach me greater self-control over the coming months, as soon as we succeeded in losing the Slayers for any considerable length of time, but until then I had to struggle with the hunger and the bloodlust as best I could. Had I been on my own I would

probably have given into it once more, but as it was I didn't want to anger Lady Sarah any further, knowing I needed her if I wanted to survive, annoying though she could be.

Beside me the vampire also took her own wolf form, although the transformation was so very different from my own. Where my kind are cursed and the change is a brutal, painful affair, Lady Sarah (and presumably other vampires who possessed the same ability) made it graceful, like shadows melding together. It was too quick for a mortal eye to follow – one form simply merged into the other, and in the blink of an eye a beautiful she wolf stood before me, holding the old fashioned black dress in her jaws which was the only thing I'd ever seen her wear. My transformation was always smoother when I willed it, rather than being forced into one form or the other by the rise and fall of the full moon, but it was still awkward when compared with the shapeshift Lady Sarah could perform. And then minutes later we slunk away, moving more swiftly and silently than any natural predator. I ignored the hunger and the weariness as best I could, pushing my lupine body to its limits in a bid to put as much distance between ourselves and the group of Slayers as we could in the time left before dawn.