

# The Hunt

By John Olsen

The old Roadside Bar looked run down. In the dark, you could just make out the faded old red paint; if it weren't for the Bud Light neon sign, you'd miss the entrance completely. It was a dive, which made Anthony smile as he pulled into the dirt parking lot. This was a perfect place to hunt tonight.

Anthony's dark blue 2006 Chrysler 300 glided to a stop outside the bar's light. He knew a place like this wouldn't have cameras, but he wanted to stay out of the way and away from the buildings. From the type of cars scattered across the dirt lot, he could tell it was a popular dive bar where people went to avoid attention.

Anthony had driven 3 hours northwest of Houston to find the perfect place to work his magic. He had been moving further out of Houston to hunt, and driving was getting tedious. He wouldn't even be out tonight if it weren't for Max's letter.

"Arrogant prick," Anthony whispered as he thought of Max.

A Sheriff's truck rolled slowly past the bar as Anthony sat in his car. Anthony watched as it passed. He knew it wasn't looking for him. The sheriff was probably checking the locals to see who was out at the bar Friday night.

Something like seeing a sheriff would have scared him off a couple of years ago, but now he felt invincible.

Anthony opened the bag on the seat next to him, pulling out his taser and zip ties, which he placed inside his jacket. He'd sewn hidden compartments in his slightly oversized black coat, which perfectly hid his ties and taser. Anthony reached behind his seat, grabbed his cane, and pulled some wire-rim glasses from under the sun visor. His sight was perfect, but the glasses added to the helpless persona he wanted to portray.

Stepping out of the car, Anthony stretched. He was 5'11" and muscular. Tonight, he had black hair. Usually, he went with dirty blond, but he'd changed it up in case someone was watching too closely. He was handsome at 34, but not to the point that he stood out. He always dressed well, but not too well. Standing out got you caught, and he wouldn't let that happen.

Leaning on the cane, Anthony hobbled towards the entrance. He had been perfecting his fake limp and had it down perfectly. The limp was part of the game, and this chapter was called "The Bundy." All of his kills now mimicked the greatest serial killers. It was part of the game he and Max had made up. "The Bundy" was named for Ted Bundy and one of his many tricks. He would pretend to be hurt and wear a cast or use a limp to lure his victim into a false sense of security and then attack.

"Fuck Max and his damn letter." Anthony cursed under his breath.

Anthony wiped the thought of Max out of his mind and smiled as he approached the old green door to the bar. This was the start, and he always got a kick of adrenaline at the beginning.

As Anthony pulled the door open, the smell of sawdust and stale beer hit him in the face. He felt pleased. "This is perfect," he thought as he quickly looked around and hobbled

towards the bar. In his swift glance, he saw four men playing pool and a waitress serving an old couple at a booth. Three old cowboys drank beer at a table, and two different tables had girls sitting and laughing. One of the tables had a young man in his 20s trying unsuccessfully to hit on a table of women, and a few people sat at the bar. No one stood out to Anthony yet. "Don't Rock the Jukebox" by Alan Jackson played on the old jukebox from the wall to the left.

As he sat down on the right side of the bar, he did so with what looked like a lot of pain in his right leg. It was a ruse, of course, but it worked.

"You okay there, sweetheart?" asked the barmaid as she walked over to serve him.

Anthony grimaces. "I'll be okay, thanks."

"What can I get you then?" she said.

Anthony looked closer at the barmaid. She must have been beautiful in her youth, but now she was weathered by years of hard drinking, and her voice was rough from the years of breathing smoke in the bar. She had a gentle aura about her as she smiled, which put Anthony at ease.

"Just a beer, please, a bottle." Anthony finally replied.

He picked the right side of the bar near the wall to watch the entire bar without drawing attention.

He glanced around as the barmaid dropped off his beer. No fish piqued his interest, but it was still early.

Anthony took a folded letter out of his pocket and read it for the 20th time today.

"Dear Hubert,

I just had to drop you a line. Fishing on the West Coast is fantastic. This week, I took a few flies out of our good buddy Ted's tackle box and caught two fat trout. I'll send you pictures in your email.

You're getting slow, old man. At this rate, I'll be tied with your fishing record by next year.

I need a challenge. Send me a new fly fishing pattern. One you think would be tricky and hard to use. Fishing is getting so easy now.

Your buddy in Christ,

Max"

To anyone who came across the letter, it would look like two buddies ribbing each other about fishing, but to Anthony, who knew the code, it was so much more. Max had used The "Ted Bundy" twice last week and got kills. He taunted Anthony by calling him an old man even though Anthony was only five years older than Max. Worst of all, he addressed Anthony as Hurbert.

Anthony clenched his teeth in anger. Max had called him Hurbert, referencing Hurbert Mullins, the sloppiest serial killer in history. Herbert was unorganized, sloppy, and mentally ill. Herbert thought killing people in California stopped earthquakes.

Anthony thought himself professional, organized, and meticulous during his hunts. Now, he was hunting much quicker than he should have because he had let Max get to him. Hunting too quickly is always dangerous; it looks suspicious.

And last, signing off as "Your Buddy in Christ" was a cut at something Anthony had said to Max. One night, in a deep conversation, Anthony had expressed how taking life made him feel like a god, how the feeling of taking a life was so exhilarating, like sucking the power out of your victim, giving him a god-like strength. Max had laughed at him. That had pissed Anthony off. "Fucking Max," Anthony whispered to himself.

Suddenly, Anthony felt someone sit next to him, and he jumped. He hadn't been paying attention, lost in his anger at Max. It took Anthony a moment to put his mask back on. The mask was the persona he used to hunt, and for a moment, he had let his anger show. Luckily, the women didn't seem to notice.

Anthony took a small sip of beer to gain his composure and then glanced at the woman beside him. She had red-blond hair halfway down her back and a fair complexion. She looked to be in her late 20s but had a strength that gave her a feeling of being older than her age. Anthony had a gift for knowing more about people than they showed him. She wore a green flannel over a tight white shirt and Levis.

Anthony slightly tapped his cane, and it slipped and fell against the woman's leg.

"I'm so sorry about that," Anthony said as he tried to grab the cane.

The cane clattered to the floor, and the woman jumped down and picked it up.

"Is this yours?" she asked as she handed it back to him.

Her hand gently brushed his as she returned it, and Anthony's adrenaline spiked.

Anthony thought she was perfect and was hitting on him; Anthony couldn't believe his luck.

Smiling slightly, Anthony nodded thankfully.

"What's your name?" Anthony blurted out. It sounded awkward, but it was meant to be.

His entire plan tonight was to seem clumsy and unassuming, and it was working.

"Erin, and you are? Erin asked with a broad grin.

Anthony smiled. She was so beautiful, he thought, but in a rugged way. Erin gave off an air of power and confidence. She'd make a perfect addition to his collection.

"Anthony. It's nice to meet you," he said, holding out his hand.

Erin laughed a little, then shook his hand.

Anthony and Erin talked for over an hour. Anthony noticed Erin touching her face, covering her mouth when she laughed, and lightly touching his arm when she spoke. All of these were signs Erin was hitting on him. Anthony, for his part, played dumb. He was shy and bumbling with his words. He was perfect at this persona.

At times, he had to slap himself mentally. He found he was mentally undressing Erin, but rather than in a romantic fashion, he was imagining hurting her. The little shots of dopamine

and endorphin ran through him as he imagined Erin's screams. He breathed deeply to calm himself, and Erin smiled at him.

She thinks I'm excited to be with her, thought Anthony. She has no idea.

"Can I get your number?" Anthony asked a little shily.

"Leaving so soon? Asked Erin, and she grabbed Anthony's arm playfully.

"It's late, and my leg tends to get more sore the later I'm on it." Anthony tapped his right leg.

"What did happen to your leg?" Erin said and slightly touched his thigh. With a shiver, Anthony looked at Erin. "Motorcycle. I rolled it over and broke my leg in three places. The bone has healed, but the muscles and ligaments are still healing. It still burns like hell."

"I'm so sorry," Erin replied with too much sweetness in her voice.

"Your Number?" Anthony repeated.

Erin grabbed his hand and whipped out a pen. She gently wrote her number on the back of his hand.

Anthony grimaced and repressed an angry revolution. He hated to have anything stain his skin. But he needed to play the part. It was almost over. With a smile, Anthony got up from the bar and threw down the money for the one beer he'd hardly touched and Erin's drink. He turned to walk, and he grimaced in imaginary pain.

Erin, who had been watching, jumped up.

"Let me walk you to your car?" she said

"No, it's okay..." Anthony began, but Erin cut him off. "I insist!"

Anthony nodded. "Thank you."

Anthony couldn't believe his luck as she grabbed her jacket and bag. He hadn't even needed to ask for help; Erin had just volunteered.

What a dumb bitch, Anthony mused.

As they walked outside, Anthony scanned the lot. They were all alone. "Which way?" Erin asked

Anthony pointed out past the reach of the lights to where his car sat. "I'm sorry. It was crowded when I got here, so I parked out a bit," Anthony apologized.

Erin waved him off, and they headed slowly to the car. The two of them laughed and flirted as they made their way to the edge of the lot. As they got to the side of the car, Anthony's adrenaline was full, and he could hear his heart pounding in his ears. Anthony purposely dragged his foot and slipped, dropping his cane and grabbing the back of the car. Erin held on to Anthony. "Are you okay?" she asked with concern.

Ashamed, Anthony shook his head, "Yes, I'm fine. I just lost my footing. Could you?" he pointed at his cane.

"Of course!" Erin replied and bent over to grab the cane.

Anthony smiled as he pulled the high-powered taser from his jacket. He lunged for Erin's back. Instantly, Anthony felt a pain in his wrist, and the taser flew from his hand. Before Anthony could react, he felt a palm with the weight of a sled hammer hit him on the chin and nose. He heard the unmistakable sound of his nose snapping, and the world spun around him as



he dropped like a marionette whose strings had been cut. His head bounced off the gravel, and he saw more stars. Anthony tried to open his eyes, but the pain in his nose caused his eyes to water. He lay still, trying to regain any sense of the world. He heard someone walk around him and then whistle a short blast. Anthony groaned in pain as he tried to get his bearings. Rolling on one side, he was able to crack one eye open. Anthony saw two feet standing near him. The feet faced away from him, and he could hear hoofs clomping in his direction. A white horse walked up to the person in front of him; Anthony could see it was an enormous horse with feathered hooves; it wore a high pommel saddle adorned with metal symbols lining around the saddle and a sword in its sheath slung in a scabbard.

"What the hell..." Anthony managed to spit out right before he saw a green flash, and everything went black.

Anthony awoke with pain running through his head like lightning. He opened his eyes, but the light from the setting sun felt like hot pokers, so he closed them again. He tried to do a mental damage report. His head throbbed, and pain radiated like fire from his nose. He was shirtless on his knees, being held up by straps attached to his arms that pulled back and out behind him. His muscles burned like he'd been in this position for a while.

What the hell happened? Anthony thought. He slowly recalled what had happened, but parts of his memory, like the horse and green flash, didn't make sense. He could hear the horse moving about and the pop of a fire. He moaned and slowly opened his eyes. After a few moments, his vision cleared; he was in an old pine forest, which made no sense. The sun was setting before him, meaning he had been out for an entire day. A giant white horse, the one

from last night, grazed off to his left. In front of him, a woman sat looking into a fire. The woman looked out of place. She had a long, green tunic with gold embroidery around the hem, and a leather breastplate covered her torso. She had leather bracers on her arms that showed gold symbols circling them in a spiral. Her gold and red hair was back in a braid, and she had a wide leather belt with a sword. Anthony stared at the woman, then laughed and spit out the congealed blood from his mouth. "Who the hell do you think you are? Where the fuck am I?!" Anthony spat; the woman didn't move.

The situation dawned on Anthony, and anger welled inside him.

"If you don't let me go, I'll cut you into little pieces, but before that, I'll make you beg me for death!"

Unexpectedly, Anthony could feel a vibration in his chest. Looking around, he realized the vibration was a growl. The deep sound was coming from his right in the falling shadows of the trees. There, staring at him, were two enormous red eyes peering out at him. The eyes glowed like red-hot steel in a forge. As the eyes approached out of the shadows, a black wolf the size of a grizzly bear walked into the light. The black beast's hair was raised on its back, and its fangs, the size of Anthony's finger, showed from behind a snarl. It continued to growl as it made its way toward Anthony.

Anthony lost control of his bladder, and tears ran down his cheeks.

The woman raised a hand and spoke in what sounded like a Nordic tongue but was sharper. The Wolf stopped its advance and walked over to the woman.

"Who are you?" Anthony gasped.

The woman turned, and Anthony could see it was Erin.

"Erin?" Anthony whispered.

The woman glared at him. "That's not name."

Anthony stared as the silence hung in the air.

The woman pulled a Brand out of the fire and held it up. It glowed neon green, and a wisp of bright blue smoke trailed upwards. She slowly advanced as Anthony begged for mercy. The woman placed the Brand high on Anthony's left chest. Anthony screamed as the sound of his sizzling flesh filled the air, and the pain rippled through his skin. Beneath the pain, Anthony felt a cold run right through his soul, and then he passed out.

Anthony found himself standing naked in a dark field at night. He was confused and lost. He looked down, and where the Brand had burned him, a green symbol he didn't recognize glowed brightly. Anthony touched it, and pain shot throughout his body. Without warning, there was a roar from the edge of the field. What appeared to be a pack of vicious wolves raced toward Anthony.

Anthony screamed and turned to run, but suddenly, he awoke to water being thrown in his face. Coming too, he could feel the pain in his head and face, but the pain in his chest overwhelmed all other sensations.

Still on his knees and hanging with his arms behind him, he looked at the woman.

"Please, please... I'll give you anything you want," Anthony begged.

The woman scoffed at him. "Did that ever work for your victims?"

"I didn't do anything. I'm not who you think I am. There has been a mistake." Anthony sputtered through his words.

"I know exactly who you are, Anthony," the woman spoke coldly.

Anthony's mind spun; there had to be a way out of this, he thought

Keep her talking; maybe someone will come along. It was all he could think to do.

"Who.... are you!" Anthony demanded.

The woman placed the Brand back in the fire and sat looking at Anthony.

After a few moments of silence, she spoke.

"My name is Astrid; it means one who is loved," she said calmly.

"I was born in 754 AD in a small village in what is now Danmark."

Anthony narrowed his eyes. "So you're crazy," he spat.

Astrid stared at him with disdain.

She continued, "My Mother was a Seidr, what you would call a sorceress. She worked for the king and community in my small Village. She taught me to be a Seidr. She taught me how to heal and commune with the gods."

Astrid hesitated and poked the fire with the Brand. Her face lit up as she went on.

"I grew up happy and married Arne, a young man I fell in love with. He was tall, handsome, and so good to me. We made a farm outside the Village. We worked our little farm, and I worked as the Seidr for the king and Village. I had my son Ulf in the spring, two years after we married. It was a beautiful time; I was so happy."

Sadness overtook Astrid's face as she paused for a few moments.

"That spring was hard; the cold stayed longer than most years, and food was short. Knud one of the kings from the north sent his son Stig and his men to raid our Village to take our food and whatever they could."

Astrid turned to stare at Anthony now with hate burning in her eyes.

"They came at daybreak as everyone was preparing for the day. The men, Arne included, took up arms and faced them, but there were too many. I watched as my love was killed."

Astrid took a deep breath and continued. "The children who were old enough to work were loaded up on the ships along with all the food and goods; babies like my Ulf were thrown into the sea or were bashed against the rocks. I watched as my Ulf was ripped from my arms and thrown screaming into the sea."

Tears ran down Astrid's face as she took a deep breath and continued.

"Stig and his men beat and raped the younger women and killed the old. I pulled a knife and slashed Stig's face when he grabbed me. He beat me until I couldn't move, then he and his men took turns raping me."

Astrid turned to the fire and peered inside, seeming to lose herself.

Anthony felt nothing. He had long ago learned not to consume others' feelings. To him, the world was his, and everyone was just his plaything. But he began to worry. Was this crazy woman about to take her pain out on him?

Astrid continued her story as she peered into the fire. "After his men were done with me, Stig walked over to where I lay beaten and bleeding. With the same feeling he would have in killing a pig, he pulled his sword and stuck it in my belly. He leaned down in my face and whispered. "That's for the cut." His face still bled from the wound I had given him on the cheek. Then, they boarded the ships and left. He had stabbed me where it would take a long time for me to suffer and die.

Astrid went quiet. Staring into the flames, lost in her thoughts. All at once, she came back to herself and continued. "I lay there in the mud, bleeding to death; I could hear the crackle of the longhouse burning and smell blood and death all around me. I was filled with rage and pain. With the last ounce of strength, I called out to Hel, the goddess of death. I swore an oath to Hel that if she let me avenge the wrongs of that day, I would serve her in any way she wished."

"Why are you doing this? I haven't done anything to you." Anthony asked,

Astrid looked over at Anthony. "I'll get to you; be patient." She said with cold indifference.

Anthony tried to get to his feet but fell back in pain to his knees.

Astrid continued, " I awoke in a field, beautiful with the sweet smell of spring all around me. I was whole and without any of my wounds. I could see a beautiful Longhouse surrounded by green hills and trees. I went to take a step towards the longhouse, and a woman appeared in front of me out of thin air. She put up a hand to stop me. She was a pale woman with bright Snowdrop flowers in her black hair. The right side of her face was perfect and beautiful with a bright blue eye, while the left side was thin and decaying. She wore a black cloak with gold runes running around the hem. I knew this was Hel, the goddess I had prayed to.

She told me I had a choice: to stay here in Folkvangr with my husband and son or to return to Midgard and avenge their death.

I chose to return, so Hel smiled and handed me this." Astrid held the brand up out of the fire.

"She told me to brand those who had wronged me. Hel blessed me, then she touched me with the palm of her hand. The next thing I knew, I was back in my burning village, but my wounds were gone, and lying next to me was this," Astrid gestured to her armor sword and horse and then to the brand in the fire, then continued.

"I found that not only had I been healed, but I possessed the strength of 100 men. I set out, and I spent three years hunting down the men who destroyed my life and village."

An evil grin crossed over Astrid's face now.

"I left Sig for last. I hunted him down and branded him, then I took my time and sacrificed him as a Blood Eagle to Hel."

Anthony shuddered; he knew what a Blood Eagle was, and the thought of having his back flayed, his ribcage broken open, and his lungs placed over his shoulders made his blood run cold.

Astrid could see his thoughts; she smiled and proceeded with her story. "After I returned to my Village, content with my revenge. I made an altar fire and a blood offering to Hel. I waited for three days, expecting to die, but I didn't. Confused, I waited, praying for death and for Hel to come back for me. On the 7th day, I awoke to Hel standing before me. I told her my job was done, and I was ready for Folkvangr and to see my family. Hel laughed at me and told me I had my reward, but now I needed to pay my tribute. Then she told me I was to hunt the hunters until Ragnarök. I was to hunt down those of Midgard who tortured women and children, those who preyed on the innocent and stole the strength of their souls. If I balanced the scales before Ragnarök and harvested enough Dark Souls, then and only then could I return to Folkvangr and be with my family."

Anthony's blood ran cold as Astrid stared at him, unblinking and without remorse.

"I am not a Dark Soul," Anthony whispered.

Astrid narrowed her eyes at Anthony. "You thought you could torture and destroy the lives of the innocent, use the lure of love as a weapon, feast on the power of their pain and death, and not suffer the consequence?" Astrid asked.

"What is the brand? Why? Why the brand?" Anthony asked, sputtering on his words.



Astrid's face broke into a broad smile. "That is the actual punishment. See, the Brand marks your soul, and after I destroy your body, you will spend eternity naked in the realm of Hel as night after night, her wolves will hunt you. Her beasts will find you and pull you limb from limb, screaming in pain just so you can awake the next day when the hunt begins again."

Anthony screamed and shouted as Astrid slowly walked behind Anthony and pulled her blade.

"Hel, except this dark soul in Blood Eagle form..." Astrid spoke.

Anthony's pain increased, and his voice ran hoarse from his screams. He had never truly understood pain until now. Abruptly, everything went black, and he stood naked on the edge of a dark field. He cowered as the screams from the beasts began.