

HUNTER'S PURSUIT

AUTHOR'S EDITION

by
KIM BALDWIN



2005

CHAPTER ONE

Hunter hated the smell of blood, the pungent, metallic scent that seemed to creep into her skin and linger there for days. But experience had taught her how to deal with it. She took shallow breaths as she stood over the chrome kitchen sink, searching the bloody clothes she'd cut off the young woman now lying unconscious in her bedroom. She was looking for a wallet, some ID, some hint to her patient's identity, but there was nothing to indicate who the woman was or what she was doing way the hell out in the middle of nowhere. In the pockets of the woman's jeans, shirt, and coat, Hunter found a few bills, some coins, and a small plain key ring containing three keys. Nothing else. She checked the labels on the clothes. No help there. The first person Hunter had ever brought to her underground bunker was a mystery. The only clue was a license plate number.

She wanted to berate herself for rescuing the woman, an action contrary to her better judgment. A lot of people wanted Hunter dead. Bringing an outsider to her hideaway was an unnecessary risk.

But she found it hard to feel threatened by the stranger who lay unmoving in the next room. She wasn't sure why. It wasn't just because the woman seemed harmless and was currently incapacitated. Hunter had exceptional instincts for danger, honed by years of training in the martial arts. And she knew better than anyone that appearances could be deceiving. But despite all the unanswered questions surrounding the woman, Hunter wasn't unduly alarmed by tonight's turn of events. She couldn't explain it. It was just a feeling.

In her line of work, gut feelings could save your life—or get you killed.

KIM BALDWIN

Hunter was not her real name, but it was an apt pseudonym. A freelance bounty hunter and assassin for hire, she was a gifted chameleon, fluent in several languages and renowned for her resourcefulness.

She had an exotic but indistinguishable look about her. Her even features and lightly bronzed complexion could suggest a Mediterranean heritage, or Latin, or maybe even Native American, and she used the ambiguity to her advantage. Last month, her hair was black and she spoke Spanish. This week it was medium brown. Very close to her natural color for the first time in a long time. She used to like the challenge of becoming someone new, but she found she missed recognizing the face that looked back at her in the mirror.

Hunter discarded the bloody clothes, washed up, and went to her desk to fire up her computer.

The bunker had a simple floor plan. The main living area was a 30 by 30 foot concrete room, with a kitchen in the northwest corner and a desk in the southwest corner. The living room took up most of the eastern half of the room. The eastern wall consisted of built-in bookshelves, all jammed with books, beyond which lay a hidden room where Hunter stored her weapons and surveillance equipment. Two doors in the southeast corner led to a bedroom and bath.

Her desk faced the room. Behind it, set into the wall, was a trio of security monitors. All were dark at the moment. Hunter hacked into the state police database and typed in **Michigan License MAK 214**. While she waited for the registration information, she rubbed her eyes and went over again the bizarre turn of events that had touched off her current situation.

The safe house was well hidden, cut into a hillside in an unpopulated region of northern Michigan just a few miles south of the Lake Superior shoreline. The densely wooded area was hilly and pocketed with small bogs, which made overland travel difficult even under the best circumstances. And fierce nor'easters sweeping down from Canada the last two weeks had created whiteout lake-effect blizzards that made negotiating even short distances impossible.

Tonight had been Hunter's first opportunity to go outside in

HUNTER'S PURSUIT

many days, and she had relished the chance to venture out into the clear, cloudless night despite temperatures near zero. She'd decided to cure her cabin fever with a hunting expedition and had been successful—the body of a small deer rested on the sled she pulled behind her.

On her journey home, Hunter paused on a high ridge. As she rested, she spotted lights in the valley below on the only road in the area, a two-lane going north/south. North, it led to a small village—Wolf Point. But the village's antique stores and restaurants, motels, and boat rentals were shuttered up from Labor Day to Memorial Day, so the road was unused this time of year except by the occasional snowmobile venturing out of Tawa, a city thirty miles to the south.

Hunter raised her rifle to one shoulder and peered through its high-powered scope. These weren't snowmobile headlights. It was a car—traveling impossibly fast in the deep snow of the unplowed road. In another minute it would pass just below her. *He'll never make the curve at that speed*, Hunter thought as she watched the sedan's progress.

The car careened past, fishtailed, and clipped a tree before flipping twice and coming to rest at the bottom of a small ravine. One headlight canted crazily upward. The other was dark.

Almost before it stopped, Hunter tossed down the rifle and pulled the deer's body from the toboggan. She jumped aboard the sled and sent it hurtling down toward the wreckage. Flames erupted from the vehicle's engine just as she dug in her heels to brake.

It took a couple of minutes to douse the fire with snow. One or two more to get the door open. A woman, unconscious, was pinned in the driver's seat. *You can't afford to get involved*, Hunter's instincts screamed, but the woman's face was bleeding and one arm was turned at an unnatural angle. She would probably freeze to death unless Hunter intervened.

Hunter leaned into the car with her small pocket flashlight, looking for a way to extricate the driver. She could smell a musky perfume mixed with the acrid scent of blood. The woman stirred and cried out in pain, and the sound pierced Hunter's armor. She had to help.

She bent back the mangled steering wheel and managed to

KIM BALDWIN

get the driver out, cradling the woman in her arms to move her the short distance to the sled.

As soon as Hunter lifted her, the woman sighed and buried her face in Hunter's neck. She reached up with her uninjured arm and touched her rescuer's cheek. It was like a lover's caress—so sweet and gentle and so unexpected that Hunter froze for a moment.

No one ever touched her like that. Or at least, no one had for a very long time.

She was surprised to discover what a lasting impression that brief caress had made. *You liked it, didn't you? You liked it very much.*

Hunter glanced at the photograph on her desk, studying the faces of the happy family pictured there. *You used to pet my cheek like that, didn't you?* She felt a twinge of regret for the choices she'd made. It was an emotion she rarely allowed herself to feel but was growing increasingly familiar with. She'd been thinking a lot lately about the past, and about retirement.

There was really no reason for her to work anymore. She had plenty of money and nothing to prove to anyone. And her conscience was beginning to nag at her after remaining mostly dormant much of her adult life. Even the righteous kills no longer held any satisfaction. And the worst parts of her past—the jobs she'd hated but had been forced to take—those kills had begun to give her nightmares.

A soft chime from her computer drew her back to the present.

In her haste to get the stranger back to the bunker, Hunter had given the wrecked sedan only a cursory inspection, but she'd seen no purse and the glove compartment was empty. The license plate was all she had to go on in trying to establish her patient's identity.

It told her the car was stolen.

According to the Michigan State Police database, the car had been reported stolen in Detroit on 2/24/05. The blue Sebring sedan was registered to a sixty-nine-year-old Ann Arbor man named Douglas Dunn. It had been taken from a gas station while its owner was inside paying for his tank of gas.

The car had been stolen a week ago, hundreds of miles away.

HUNTER'S PURSUIT

Curiouser and curiouser, Hunter thought, frowning. She rose from her chair to check on her mysterious patient.



The injured woman stirred, caught halfway between sleep and wakefulness. Something seemed to be holding her down, pressing against her chest. It cut into her side with every breath. She felt too warm and her body ached. But the worst was the shooting pain in her head. She tried to force her mind to a place without pain. An impossible task. But after a time, she fell back into the black void of sleep.



Hunter touched her hand to the woman's forehead. Feverish. She backed away and settled into an overstuffed chair she'd pulled beside the bed and studied the woman who lay unmoving under a heavy fleece blanket tucked around her like a cocoon.

Her patient was 5 foot 4 or so, with a firm, well-toned body. She looked to be about twenty-five, ten years younger than Hunter, and she was probably quite attractive, but it was hard to tell for sure at the moment. Bandages hid much of her face and the areas that were exposed were puffy and bruised. Her nose had been broken, blackening both eyes, and there was a small lump behind one ear. Her shoulder-length blond hair was matted with dried blood, and a three-inch gash on her forehead had been closed with several neat stitches of dental floss. Her left arm was set with a makeshift splint, her left knee was wrapped in an Ace bandage, and her rib cage had been tightly taped when Hunter felt at least two, and probably three, cracked ribs.

Hunter had taken several classes for paramedics. She'd received a multitude of injuries over the years in her job, sometimes in countries where doctors were scarce, other times in places where stabbings and gunshot wounds required physicians to contact law enforcement. So she treated her own injuries when she could.

But it had been quite another experience altogether to treat

KIM BALDWIN

this stranger. She'd tried to be clinical about it. Detached. Detached was something she was normally very good at.

But she couldn't help but notice when she stripped off the woman's clothes what soft skin lay beneath. Pale and fair, where Hunter was dark. The silky flesh unmarked, except for two scars. One an inch long, above her right eye, and a raised, jagged one on her abdomen that Hunter found herself lightly tracing with a fingertip, as if by doing so she could discern the injury that had caused it.

As she gently probed the stranger's ribs for injuries, Hunter's eyes strayed to the woman's full, round breasts, nipples pink and hard in the cool bunker.

She took her time examining and treating the woman.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd been quite this turned on.



Something brought the injured woman back to the edge of consciousness, a murky place where the relentless drumming in her head overshadowed the pain elsewhere in her body. She struggled to open her eyes, fighting hazily to learn the circumstances of her pain, but she could see nothing.

All was black. And still. There was only the pain. Horrible, horrible pain. *Dear God, make it stop!* She couldn't move. *Where am I?* Her mind was unable to tell her where she was or how she got there. A rush of panic washed over her. *Am I dead? Can you be in pain when you're dead? Am I in hell?*

She had to move her body. To connect again with the real world. She tried to raise her arms to throw off the confining covers, but the effort brought a sharp new pain to her left forearm, momentarily eclipsing the throbbing in her head. She gasped aloud, a raspy sound that seemed to come from very far away.

"Can you hear me?"

A voice! A human voice! A woman, very near. I'm not dead. And someone is with me. Knowing she was not alone, wherever she was, pushed back the panic a little.

HUNTER'S PURSUIT

“Can you hear me?” the voice asked again. It was low and melodious. Soothing.

She wanted to answer. The voice was a lifeline. A beacon in her black world. But it was an effort. “What?” The word came out as a croak. “Where...?”

“You’re safe,” said the voice. “Everything is all right.”

The words had a calming effect. The panic receded somewhat. *Hospital. Must be in the hospital. What happened?* She wanted to talk, but her throat was swollen and dry. Her tongue was made of sandpaper. “Can’t...” she tried again. Her head pounded away, relentless.

“Try to drink a little. I’ll help you.”

Gentle arms lifted the woman’s head and shoulders—a movement that amplified her pain.

“Stop!” she screamed.

Her upward progress was halted, and the low voice spoke again, a whisper close to her ear. “Try to relax and focus on your breathing. It will help against the pain. In...and out. In...and out. That’s good. Now I’m going to give you some water. You must try and drink some.”

Slender fingertips gently parted her swollen lips and guided a plastic straw between them. She sucked on it and felt cool water flood her mouth and throat, relieving a bit of her discomfort. After a few sips, she released the straw and was laid gently back against the mattress.

“What happened?” Speaking took tremendous effort. The sound seemed to reverberate in her head.

“I know you must feel like hell,” said the voice, suspended in the darkness to her right. “You got banged up pretty good. A broken wrist, some cracked ribs, maybe a concussion.”

“Where am I?” Another wave of pain assaulted the woman’s already throbbing head.

“You’re in my home...a long way from the nearest doctor, and it’s impossible to move you. There’s no phone here, but I really think you’ll be fine. You need to rest now.”

“Can’t...see,” the woman rasped. She tried to swallow. Coughed.

The gentle hands cupped the back of her head, bringing it up

KIM BALDWIN

very slowly, and reinserted the straw between her lips. She sucked eagerly on it. The cool water seemed to dull the throbbing in her head.

“Your eyes are swollen shut, and the room is dark to help you sleep. Don’t worry about all that now. Give the swelling time to go down. Get some rest,” the voice urged before moving away.

Wait! Don’t go! Don’t leave me alone! What’s happened to me? Who are you? But she was alone again, she could feel it. Silence. Darkness. The fear began to creep back in, just a little.

Focus on your breathing, the voice had said. And so she did. In...and out. In...and out.

A nice voice, she thought hazily. A caring, kind voice. Her mind conjured it up again. There was a hint of an accent, wasn’t there? Sexy. It was a distraction from the pain. From her disorientation. In...and out. In...and out. She surrendered to the voice and drifted back into an emptiness devoid of dreams.



She’ll have more questions when she wakes up, Hunter thought as she returned to her living room. *I better start thinking about what I’m going to tell her, who I’m going to be. Nothing too elaborate. Keep it simple. Of course, the bunker does make things a little more complicated.*

She had adopted a number of personalities over the years. Heiress, Pilot, Chef. The heiress identity had gotten her close to a rich Italian shipping magnate whose secret business involved the transporting of illicit human flesh to high-paying clients who used them for sex and servitude. Girls and boys, most not yet sixteen. She felt no remorse when she put a gun to the man’s head.

Not the heiress, she decided. *Maybe the chef?* She went to her refrigerator and pulled the door open. There were a few apples, two eggs, and a half brick of cheese—the only remnants of the perishables she’d brought in by snowmobile three weeks earlier. She usually stayed in the bunker between jobs. *Nah. Can’t be the chef. Even one eccentric enough to have a bunker home would still have more in her icebox.*

The food situation wasn’t as dire as it appeared. A door off the

HUNTER'S PURSUIT

kitchen led to a large pantry, twelve feet long by eight feet wide. Deep shelves held a large variety of dried and canned goods and staples like flour and sugar, powdered milk and eggs.

I should go back to pick up the deer, especially since I have another mouth to feed. Hope nothing's gotten to it. She was glad she had field dressed the animal and that the temperature outside was well below freezing. She also needed to retrieve her rifle. *Wouldn't hurt to have another look at that car, either.*

She headed back to her desk and picked up the remote control as she dropped into the chair and turned to face the monitors. She clicked on the first one and studied the security camera's image of the forested area just outside the well-hidden entrance. The tracks from the sled were still visible. *That's pretty easy to follow, if someone has an inclination to.*

She wasn't expecting company. But this was apparently a night for the unexpected, so she didn't like having a clear trail from the wreck right to her front door. *What the hell was she doing out on that road?*

Hunter flipped off the monitor and wheeled around to face the desk. She reached for her computer keyboard and opened her instant message program, selecting "Kenny" from her list of contacts.

Kenny Foster was the closest thing she had to family. They'd met seven years ago at the Academy. She was a veteran by then, but still living on the grounds.

He was ten years younger, and still a new recruit. At first, Hunter regarded Kenny as nothing more than another link in the chain of computer whiz kids who were common at the Academy. They came and went with startling frequency—most of them geeky, adolescent boys who leered at her and hit on her mercilessly until they learned who she was.

Kenny was different. He had a genius level IQ and a maturity that belied his age. Though he too had a hideous crush on her, he hid it well most of the time and never approached her about it or spoke to her at all. But she caught him watching her surreptitiously when they crossed paths at the cafeteria or elsewhere on the grounds.

He began to get a reputation at the school—a difficult task in an environment of overachievers. He had a special gift with

KIM BALDWIN

computers, and it was rumored he could crack into any database or computer in the world. Despite his tender age, he began to be assigned some top-level jobs. His first assignment in the field was under Hunter's supervision, and it was fortunate it was or he'd not have made it back.

When she learned they would be working together, Hunter sought him out. She found him alone on a bench on the grounds and joined him. She was a little intrigued by the baby-faced, slightly built teenager. She'd heard about his technical skills but knew very little else about him.

"You don't look old enough to drink," she said by way of greeting.

"Good disguise, huh? I'm really forty-two and balding."

She laughed.

"We're going to be working together, I hear," he said. "I don't want you to think I can't take care of myself because I can."

"Glad to hear it."

"I scored a 92 on my marksmanship test yesterday."

"Impressive," she said.

"Getting there. But I don't think I'll ever have your consistency. Did you ever get less than a perfect score when you were in training?"

She smiled at him. So he'd hacked into her file. "What else do you know about me?"

"You're twenty-eight and single," he offered. "You speak six languages fluently: English, Greek, French, Spanish, German, and Arabic. And you know a smattering of Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Chinese, and Japanese. You have black belts in several martial arts disciplines, and you're an expert fencer. And you weren't born in this country, but I couldn't track down where you were born, or what your real name is."

"Pretty good," she said. "Now what about you?"

"I'm eighteen," he said. "Good at computers and math, but not much else, I'm sorry to say."

"Parents? Family?"

"Dead," he said, without elaborating.

She looked into his eyes and saw herself—a solitary orphan

HUNTER'S PURSUIT

with pathetic social skills and no direction. He was a kindred spirit.

“Mine too,” she revealed. But the memories were still too painful.

There was another long silence.

“You’ll do fine,” Hunter said, getting to her feet. “I’ll keep an eye out for you.”

She had done just that, and brought him home alive.

Afterward, at her urging, he decided to remain in the relative safety of the computer room and kept his ear to the ground. That suited Hunter fine. She didn’t have to worry about his well-being, and she had a faithful ally in the inner sanctum. Two years later, when she escaped the Academy, she took Kenny with her.

There was nothing he wouldn’t do for her.

She typed: **Hey buddy, checking in. Anything interesting on the pipeline these days?**

She glanced again at the photo on the desk while she waited. Her guest wouldn’t be up and around for a while, but she thought it best to put it away. Avoid questions. She opened the bottom drawer and put the photo face down atop a pile of file folders. Then she locked the desk and pocketed the key.

A chime from her computer drew her attention back to the monitor. The reply from Kenny read: **Shit yes, Hunter. You’re in danger! I’ve been trying to reach you for two days—someone’s put a million dollar contract out on you. Don’t know who yet, or whether anyone’s gonna try to collect. Working on it. Be careful.**

Hunter took a deep breath and let it out slowly, forcing herself to relax against the tension building between her shoulder blades. She typed: **Keep me posted, but quit worrying. I’m safe.**

Yeah, right. Where have I heard that before?

Hunter stared at her computer screen. *Someone puts a million-dollar price tag on your head one day, and the next—a woman shows up on your lonely road. With no ID. Driving a stolen car like the devil himself was after her.* The hair stood up on the back of her neck.

KIM BALDWIN

You should rest, she told herself. She'll be out for a while, and you should be sharp for question-and-answer time.

Hunter lay down on the leather couch in the living room. *Let's just say for a moment she isn't after me. This is just some weird coincidence. Whoever this woman is, what the hell am I going to tell her?*

She closed her eyes and began to take deep, even breaths. As she drifted off, her mind considered and rejected several more identities. *Law enforcement. Personal trainer. Musician. Possible. But the security monitors would be kind of hard to explain. Gardener. Architect. Paramedic. That one's not bad. But a paramedic would have a phone and a pager. And better medical supplies. No, it should be a job where I could be working from home. Maybe something connected to the Internet...*

The dream began as it always did. She was opening the door to his bedroom. Everything was going smoothly. The layout of the house had been exactly as described. She had only to dispatch her target and get the hell out of there. No muss, no fuss.

His outline under the covers was clearly visible in the moonlight streaming in through the window beside the bed. The blankets were in disarray. Like Hunter, he was a restless sleeper. But he didn't stir as she approached the bed, and his soft snoring satisfied her that he was well and truly asleep.

She didn't know his name. She knew nothing of him at all, except that he was alone in the house, and he had to die. Garner thought it best, in the beginning, to give her as little information as possible.

So she put the gun to his head. But before she could pull the trigger, there was a noise behind her. She whirled around. A figure stood silhouetted in the doorway.

It was only her third assignment, and it was the first time things didn't go exactly as expected. She did as she'd been taught. It had been drilled into her, over and over again. Leave no witnesses.

She raised the gun and fired at the silhouette, then spun back to the bed and fired again as the sleeping figure came awake. The man in the bed made no further movement or noise. But the other

HUNTER'S PURSUIT

did not die immediately. There was a sound from the doorway, a soft moan of pain.

Hunter had to be sure. She pulled out her flashlight and approached the dark figure on the floor. The flashlight's bright narrow beam found a teenaged boy. Tall. Blond. Young. Fifteen or sixteen, probably. He had pajamas on, and there were braces on his teeth. Blood was pumping out of him at a furious pace from the hole in his chest, and Hunter knew he would die soon.

"Dad!" the boy moaned. He reached out with a bloody hand and grasped the cuff of Hunter's pants. "Dad!"

Hunter woke from the dream as she always did, thrashing about in a cold sweat, trying to shake the boy off, heart pounding.

She never knew the boy's name. But he haunted her still.

Hunter lay on the couch, feeling not at all rested from her nap. Her eyes scanned the wall of bookshelves facing her, and she considered what lay behind them. The secret chamber that housed her arsenal. Her mind returned to her search for the right identity. *And just how would you ever begin to explain the tools of your trade?*

It was that thought that gave her the answer she was looking for. The persona that was perhaps closest to her heart was perfect for her current situation. It would explain the bunker, the isolated location, even the security monitors. The tools that were behind the wall—some of them anyway—would be the perfect window dressing to the story. So would the bunker's décor.

She went to the bookshelves and removed a first edition of *The Secret Garden* from a high shelf. She stood on her tiptoes and pressed the button that was hidden behind it. A loud click confirmed the unlocking of the center panel, which she swung open to reveal her armory. She ignored the safes that contained her weapons and moved to the one that housed her surveillance equipment.

Hunter opened the safe and pulled out a high-powered spotting scope, her night-vision goggles, and her 35mm and digital cameras. She placed them on the coffee table in front of the couch. Her large-format field camera and tripod were set up in a corner of the living room before she closed the bookshelf panel and locked it again.

KIM BALDWIN

She was pleased with her solution, and not just because her photographer identity would explain the bunker and its contents. *I don't want to lie to her if I don't have to*, she realized, *and this is close to the truth*. The admission startled her. She was a practiced liar, and did it well. *Why don't I want to lie to her?*

She had no answer for that. There was just something about the woman that she found intriguing. The stranger brought out a gentle, nurturing side of Hunter that she wasn't aware she was even capable of. And she had certainly stimulated Hunter's libido.

Resigning herself to the unfamiliar feelings, Hunter began thinking about how she would introduce herself to her guest. She swore long ago she would never tell anyone her real name again, yet she didn't want to use Hunter, either. She didn't know what the woman was doing there, or who she was. It wouldn't be prudent to admit her real identity.

And there was another reason.

You just don't want to be Hunter anymore, do you? Hunter is ruthless. Unfeeling. And that's not what you want to be with her.

No immediate solution came to mind.

She returned to her computer to check in with Kenny.

Anything new? she typed.

His response came at once. **Yes. At least two takers on your contract. Our old friend Otter, and a woman—no ID on her yet. Still don't know who is behind it. More soon, I hope.**

A woman? Oh, Lord. This just gets better, Hunter thought. Her head began to throb.

Her gut feeling still refused to acknowledge that the woman in the next room might be dangerous. But she had to admit that she wasn't altogether certain her hormones weren't clouding her judgment. She vowed not to let her guard down.

She returned to the bedroom. The only light spilled in through the half-open door. She checked the woman's forehead again. The fever seemed to be gone, but the woman moaned softly in her sleep, apparently in pain.

Hunter untucked the blanket on the left side of the bed and pulled it back to check the makeshift splint she'd wrapped around

HUNTER'S PURSUIT

her patient's left wrist. *Not a bad job, if I do say so myself. That'll heal just fine.*

She started to cover the woman again, but froze when she caught sight of something she had missed earlier while treating the woman's injuries. *Damn. How could I not have noticed that? Probably because you were staring at her breasts.* Hunter frowned. She felt a sharp pang of disappointment. *I bet someone is looking for her.*