

CHAPTER 1

“For after years of living in a cage, a lion no longer even believes it is a lion.”

– John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*

Loni had always assumed that Stu would eventually kill her.

She stood in her musty bedroom closet, oblivious to a strangling November fog outside, and attempted to collect her thoughts. After sliding a handful of wire hangers down the rod and brushing a lock of auburn curls behind her ear, she looked at the metal box she’d exposed. *Was this the moment she’d dreamt of?* All Loni knew was that she had grown tired of listening to her husband’s incessant tirades, tired of ducking to avoid his slaps and punches, tired of fetching his personal possessions as if she were a dog.

She turned a key, then stared at the open gun safe, considering what to do next. Maybe she should just snap the magazine into the semi-automatic pistol, wheel about, then fire off a round—or seven—into his chest. Stu certainly deserved payback, not just for last night’s beating but also for the cumulative abuse he’d doled out during their long marriage. Loni lifted the components of the forty-five caliber Glock from the safe. *Just like the movies*, she thought.

Snap, squeeze, boom, thump.

For years, she'd felt like a zoo animal, scrutinized by a surly, cruel keeper whose sole purpose was to make her life miserable. This pistol was the key to her cage. Beneath the smell of gun oil and the sweaty stench of a police uniform hanging from the rod, Loni allowed herself to imagine a sweeter fragrance: the scent of freedom.

She exhaled slowly, a low whistle escaping her lips. As she examined the cold metal in her hands, she suddenly understood that she couldn't confront her controlling husband, couldn't drop his pasty, doughy body with one shot, couldn't kill the man Dylan called Dad. Because Loni Maddux didn't know how to fire his gun.

"I'm gonna be late," Stu growled. "Stop screwing around and help me."

Loni's cage door clanged shut. She shuddered and turned, her face cast downward, and surrendered the service weapon to him.

Stu laid the Glock on the bed, then leaned over and fastened an ankle holster over his sock, his only clothing except for a pair of white briefs which fit his rolling gut like a size-sixteen shirt on a size-eighteen neck. Thick hair covered his chest and back, making him appear Neanderthal. He straightened, and gave Loni one of his looks. "I saw you with that guy yesterday. In his tight shorts. Big muscles under that brown shirt."

"He was the UPS man!" Loni protested. "He delivered a package."

"I bet he did."

Loni held her tongue and drew a deep breath. "It was for you. From that hunting catalog. Probably your new jacket. Didn't you order some stuff for Tornado, too?" Tornado was their troublesome chocolate Lab who seemed to seek out Loni's shoes and Loni's purse when he had the inclination to chew, pee, or take a dump. Stu and Dylan both called the dog

Nado, but to Loni he'd always be the destructive force known as Tornado.

Stu eyed her carefully. He stood and slid on the dark-gray trousers of his police uniform.

“Where are my shoes?”

Loni swallowed hard, remembering that one of those polished, black shoes flew across the bedroom last night and struck her above the left temple, punctuating an argument and momentarily dulling her consciousness. She pointed to the carpet where one shoe lay, then to the dresser across the room. “You get off at seven?” she mumbled.

“Yeah.”

“I'll have dinner ready.” She had no intention of repeating the events of yesterday, when Stu's complaints about cold burgers and limp, greasy French fries had escalated into rants about her poor mothering abilities and, finally, the all-too-common accusations about her faithfulness.

“Make something decent,” Stu grumbled. “Dylan deserves a home-cooked meal.”

Last night's words echoed in her head: *You're a worthless mom*. Loni had wanted to scream back, tell Stu he was a horrible father and husband, but thoughts of Dylan—and a size 9½ missile—had kept her silent. God knew she was an imperfect parent, but Loni had done one thing right: she'd protected her son. Dylan had never known the feeling of worthlessness after a scathing rebuke, the pain of a knobby knuckle twisted between the ribs, the taste of blood from a busted lip.

She wouldn't argue with Stu this morning either, but she wanted to prove him wrong. She could cook a nice dinner. Yet with the budget he'd established, she could barely afford hamburger. “How about meatloaf?” she suggested.

“Not again.”

“I could make it with brown gravy instead of tomato sauce. And mashed potatoes.”

“No.”

And when Stu said *No*, that ended the conversation. He told Loni what he wanted, and she did it. So Loni needed to create the perfect meal, because she keenly understood the lesson learned early in her marriage: *Failure has consequences*.

A bark sounded from the doorway, and a young chocolate Lab bounded in. His entire backside wagged rhythmically, his tail looking like a conductor’s baton during “Flight of the Bumblebee.”

“Nado, come,” Stu called, his voice suddenly affectionate. “Give me a kiss.” Stu crouched, and Tornado loped into his open arms and nuzzled his nose into the man’s hairy chest. He rubbed the dog’s head and gave him a peck on the ear. “You’re a good boy, aren’t you, Nado? Yes, you are. We’re gonna kill us some quail this weekend. You ready to hunt?” Nado barked. “Hunt!” he repeated, and Nado spun three tight circles and barked twice, wagging his tail in a helicopter motion. Stu laughed so hard that he farted.

Loni stared at her husband in stony silence. The selfish lout who drenched his skin with Old Spice and his liver with Jack Daniel’s, the penny pincher who wouldn’t pay for vacuum cleaner repair or cable TV, was the same man who had shelled out more than four hundred bucks for a Labrador puppy. “I didn’t know you were going hunting this weekend,” she said.

Stu stuffed a small-caliber revolver into his ankle holster. He rose and tugged on his shirt, then strapped the Glock to his waist. Then he turned to Loni, the harshness returning to his face. “Season opens tomorrow.”

“Aren’t you taking Dylan to the Kansas game?”

Stu inspected himself in the mirror, licked his fingers, and matted down a cowlick. “Like I can afford football tickets on a cop’s salary. Me and Dylan already have plans.”

Loni wanted details but knew better than to ask. Stu acted on his own timetable.

“Dylan’s going with me. Time to teach that boy how to hunt. We’ll catch the Chiefs game Sunday at a sports bar. Maybe Hooters.”

“He’s twelve!”

“This is none of your business,” he snapped, then marched out of the room, shouldering her as he passed, his holster brushing her hip.

Loni remembered the gun safe. *Next time I’ll be ready.*

Stu reached for the doorknob, hesitated, then turned around. “Tell me what you’re doing today.”

“I gotta go shopping—”

“You don’t need nothing.”

Loni lowered her eyes. “Just groceries. For tonight.”

“Twenty bucks. That’s all you get. And speaking of tonight. It’s been two days. Wear your fishnets. Maybe that nurse outfit. I’ll bring handcuffs.”

She recoiled inwardly but forced a wan smile, managing to complete what qualified as foreplay in the Maddux household.

Loni followed her husband through a soupy fog which obliterated the outside world, then watched him crawl into a beat-up Chevy truck. As the engine roared to life with a throaty rumble, strains of hard rock vibrated the truck’s glass. Stu rolled down his window, and the unmistakable screeching sounds of Ted Nugent—both guitar and vocals—split the morning silence. He mouthed, “I’ll see you later.”

I’ll see you later—the words hung like a threat. Loni watched as the pickup drove away, its diesel engine belching acrid smoke, its radio spewing loud music; then it then disappeared.

Instantly, she felt her body relax. The rest of the day would be hers, she knew, at least until Dylan came home from school. And when Stu got off work—well, she'd deal with that when the time came.

“Hi, Loni!” a cheery voice called through the white haze.

Loni walked fifty feet across the lawn and found Betty Losenkopf, her next-door neighbor, dragging a garbage can to the curb. Although she wore nondescript clothing over her average, thirty-something frame, Betty stood out in a crowd, her makeup liberally applied with trowel and paintbrush, possibly a caulk gun. “Don't forget, it's trash day!”

Loni flashed an *I'm-safe-so-it's-okay-to-be-happy* smile. “The trash just left in a pickup.”

“You are so bad!” Betty laughed. “Did I tell you about last weekend?”

Loni stared blankly.

“Alex and me?” Betty was married to Alex Losenkopf, a professional of some sort, an accountant or computer whiz, a guy you'd order out of a *Perfect Husband* catalog. “We celebrated our fifth anniversary.”

“Oh.”

“Alex gave me a huge bouquet of roses and one of those half-day spa treatments. He's so romantic.” Betty moved closer; her voice dropped to a conspiratorial level. “We spent all weekend in bed.”

“Good for you.” Loni's weekend had gone differently, as Stu had enjoyed two hours on a barstool and, later, two minutes in the sack. Loni hadn't enjoyed anything.

Tornado barked and nosed Loni's leg. She reached down and patted his head, which caused his tail to thump against the trash can. Then she sighed. “Betty, I need your help.”

“Whatcha need, sweetie?”

“I have to cook a nice meal tonight for Stu. I’m at a total loss.”

“You’re so cute, still planning romantic dinners. How long you guys been married?”

“Fourteen years,” Loni lied. Stu had married her a mere four months before Dylan was born, so it was easy to remember how long she’d spent paying for the mistake of hooking up with the slick-talking police recruit from Topeka.

“Wow. Fourteen. Next year’s a big one. He should take you to Hawaii.”

Loni nodded, unsure of what to say. She’d never felt comfortable sharing her complicated personal life with others.

“Definitely Hawaii, or one of those Alaskan cruises. I have a whole collection of travel brochures. Borrow whatever you want.”

“I’ll think about it. Right now, I’m just worried about tonight’s dinner.”

“Follow me. I’ve got a recipe for chicken spaghetti that’s amazing.”

“Thanks, but—”

“I know, sounds plain. Just use penne pasta instead of spaghetti if you want fancy. Splurge on fresh-grated parmesan. And buy one of those salads in a bag. Serve it in a glass bowl. You’ll be like Martha Stewart.”

Loni held Betty’s arm. “Please. The meal has to be perfect. Stu’s . . . uh . . . picky.”

“There’s a drawback, though. Stuff works like Thanksgiving turkey. It’ll spoil any plans for sweaty loving. One big plate of Betty Spaghetti, and your man’ll just drift off to sleep.”

Betty laughed and adjusted her boobs inside her bra.

“So,” Loni said, “can I have the recipe?”



By early afternoon the fog had dissipated, and the cloudless sky turned a rich cerulean. Loni chopped fresh mushrooms on a butcher block cutting board and peered out the box window above the sink. Her gaze slid past long-forgotten aloe vera plants and miniature cacti imprisoned in garage-sale crockery, past the window's burglar bars, and toward the concrete intersection of their aging subdivision. She remembered what Kansas looked like when she was a girl, sitting in her momma's lap, watching the wheat stalks wave like the grasses of an African savannah.

She set down the knife and moved to the stove, where penne pasta boiled in a dented, stainless-steel pot. She stirred onions sautéing in the skillet; the pungent aroma filled the room. A three-pound chicken cooled on a plate at the kitchen table, next to a grocery bill for nineteen dollars and forty cents.

The back door opened, and Tornado padded in, followed by Dylan. Her son looked sullen, as usual, and dark hair hung down over his eyes. His denim jacket was covered with embroidered patches of Metallica, Slayer, and Megadeth. Dylan had the temperament of a high schooler, but he wouldn't celebrate his thirteenth birthday for another six months. He threw his backpack on the floor and scowled at his mother. "I'm hungry."

"We'll eat in a couple hours. I'm cooking dinner."

Dylan made a sour face and said, "Forget it." He retreated to the adjoining room and fired up *Guitar Hero* on the Playstation.

Loni followed, almost tripping over the dog. "Your dad said he's taking you hunting this weekend."

"That's the plan."

She wiped her hands on a towel. "You like hanging out with your dad? Dylan?"

His fingers flew across the guitar controller, striking keys to match the notes on the video

game. His eyes remained fixed on the screen.

“How was your math test?”

The TV made a *game over* sound, and Dylan spiked the guitar to the ground. “I just know I failed. I hate school.” He rushed away, toward the stairs, then stopped and scrunched his nose. “What stinks?”

Loni looked back to the kitchen. Black smoke rose from the stove. “Oh no!” She rushed to the skillet, where now-black onions threatened to burst into flames. Water from the pasta foamed over and vaporized with a whoosh. When Loni turned off the burners and lifted the pot of boiling water, the steam scalded her skin. She yelped and dumped everything into the trash.

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she ran cold water over her reddening palm; the burning pain spread deeper. She was going to let him down. Again. Loni thought of Betty and Alex, how they’d share a good laugh if the same fate befell their dinner. But Stu wasn’t Alex.

“I gotta make this work,” Loni mumbled. “Just need to dig up some money and go to the store again.” She turned to fetch her purse, then gasped.

Tornado stood atop the kitchen table, paws splayed across the surface, his face shoved deep inside the chicken. He gnawed furiously, nudging the plate to the table’s edge, where it crashed to the floor.

“No!” She pushed the dog off the table and drew back her leg to kick him, but he scurried across the room. She screamed, “You always ruin everything, you goddamn mutt! Now guess who he’s gonna blame.” She threw open the door and pointed. “Get out!”

Loni slumped into a chair and collapsed into sobs. She kicked at the partially devoured bird. “Screw it,” she said, and tossed the chicken outside. “Here you go. All yours.”

Nado attacked the carcass again, making guttural noises as he ripped meat from bone,

gulping without chewing. Bones cracked as his jaws tore apart the chicken. Suddenly Nado stopped and hunched over, attempting to hack up something.

Loni watched the jerking dog, first disgusted, then confused, then horrified. He fell onto his side, convulsing as if in the throes of dry heaves. His eyes bulged in panic.

She raced outside and shoved her hand down the dog's throat. As his jaws clenched on her wrist, she tried to ignore the pain while sweeping her fingers, trying to dislodge what was choking him. She withdrew her hand, blood now pouring from Nado's bite marks, then sharply pressed the dog's chest in an attempt to perform the Heimlich. She tried CPR. Nothing worked.

Minutes passed. Loni collapsed to the concrete, her body trembling. Despite her efforts, Nado lay dead, his open eyes glassy and still. She stroked the dog's fur and wept. "I'm sorry, Nado! I'm so sorry!"

The door opened, and Dylan poked his head out. "Dad's on the phone. He wants to— Oh shit!"

"Tornado just—"

"Mom! What did you do?"

"Nothing. I—"

"Dad's on the phone."

"Oh, God! Don't tell him anything. I'll be right there."

Dylan held his forehead with both hands. "What did you do?"

Loni looked at the dog. Stu's dog. The dog she'd just killed. *Failure has consequences.*

Dylan handed her the phone when she came inside. "I didn't say a word," he whispered, covering the mouthpiece.

"Hi, Stu," she spoke into the receiver. Blood droplets fell from her hand to the carpet.

“Good news,” he said. “Got off early. Be home in half an hour. What are you making?”

Loni gaped at the dead dog and ruined kitchen. In a shaky voice she said, “It’s . . . a surprise,” then hung up.

She considered her options. Stay home and get beaten half to death—maybe worse. Or take the step she’d only dreamed about. The cage door was ajar.

“What’s Dad gonna do?” Dylan asked, his eyes wide with fear.

Loni ran to her purse. “You’ve got five minutes. Grab whatever you can. We’re leaving!”