

# *Wild Evolution*



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# Wild Evolution



Colorado rancher Dan Tucker defends his livestock against a mutant wild dog attack in a kill or be killed battle. When he takes the head of the animal in to be tested for rabies, he discovers he has the head of a man instead. Now he is forced to cover up a self-defense killing, because no one would believe he killed a wild dog when he has a human head.

A werewolf by contamination, Dan finds himself quickly losing control. With all his senses heightened, including his passion for the wild, he finds a new love interest and has a chance at the life he wants. But that seems impossible with the bodies piling up and his former best friend, a county sheriff's deputy, determined to prove him guilty of murder.

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*C. Fern Cook*

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*by*

***C. FERN COOK***



## CHAPTER ONE

The gentle rustling of the wind passing through the treetops is shattered by violent barking and thunderous pounding. The thrashing pulsates through the walls and across the yard, making it sound as if the barn will collapse any minute. The piercing howls and yelps continue but the crushing blows have abruptly stopped.

Dan jumps out of bed; pulls on his jeans and grabs his 30/30 from the corner of his bedroom and runs out to see what is going on. He trips over his boots as he runs towards the stairs in the darkened house, causing him fall into the railing and stumble down the rest of the steps.

As he charges into the barn, he stops at the barn door to catch his breath. Bent over and leaning against the door frame, he scans the area to locate the cause of this disturbance. His attention immediately turns to his lifeless mare and her foal lying in a pool of their own blood. The blood is still seeping from their shredded throats; their heads are barely attached to their bodies. His eyes focus on what's left of his two cow dogs; they are lying motionless with their necks in an unnatural position only a few feet away from the mare's carcass.

A faint whimpering sound comes from behind the horse stall. Dan's lead cow dog, Jake, is trying to drag himself under a pile of straw. He drops down to his knees to check out his comrade, leaving his rifle lying on the ground. Cradling his partner in his lap with his back next to the wall,

he strokes Jake's face softly while slowly rocking back and forth to comfort his friend.

Jake can no longer move his hind legs and lies in Dan's lap, staring into his comrade's eyes, begging Dan to fix what is wrong. Hot tears of anger flow down Dan's face, making his stomach tighten like a rock as he tries to hold back his urge to scream. Sickened by the sight of all the blood and his partner lying on his lap dying, he leans back, refusing to believe his own eyes. He closes his eyes, his mind unable to take it all in as he tries to wish away the reality around him.

In the past, Dan has always been able to take care of whatever is wrong with his dogs; but this time there is nothing he can do to make it right. An occasional whimper is let out as life slips away from his four legged partner. Every whimper tears his heart a little more. He takes one last look, but it is too much for him to endure when he sees the fear in his defenseless friend's eyes. He lays his hand over Jake's eyes and turns away, waiting for this tragedy to be over.

An enormous growl breaks his mourning. He turns his head towards the sound and opens his eyes to see an astonishing sight: a blood soaked mutant canine is charging at him with only his dead dog between him and the massive teeth lunging at him.

Without thinking, Dan shoves his dead dog into the huge attacking jaws. In a blink of an eye, the attacker throws the dead carcass aside and wraps his teeth around Dan's thigh, shaking the flesh vigorously, attempting to tear the limb off his body.

Reaching for any weapon possible, Dan fumbles with the equipment hanging on the wall above him. Grabbing a mountain climbing pick with both arms, he pulls

the pick straight down between the shoulders of this attack machine. Within seconds he can feel the jaws release their grip on his thigh. He pushes the mutant canine off his bleeding leg. Dragging himself up to a standing position, he watches for any movement from his attacker, making sure it is dead.

Stunned by what has happened, he stares out the open barn door and at a shimmering full moon. As if nothing evil has happened, the heavens allow the moon to cast its brilliant light down on earth. The moonlight highlights the horrible scene he had just survived. Now standing at the doorway of the barn, he rages, screaming at the moon for letting this happen to him, screaming until he has no voice left.

Emotionally drained, Dan collapses into a kneeling position. Holding his head in his hands, he hides from the reality that is behind him. When he rises up, he is in an emotional void running only on instinct. Mechanically he goes back to his house to bandage his wound. When he returns to the barn he is carrying a meat saw and a cooler. Matter-of-factly he removes the head of the beast and tucks it inside the cooler so he can take it in to be tested for rabies in the morning.

It's late and Dan is physically and emotionally exhausted from tonight's event. Dragging himself back into the house, he drops onto the couch, belly side down. Too tired and still in shock, he doesn't bother to clean up; his tattered, torn, and tired body falls into a comatose state of sleep.

When he awakens, the first thing he does is put the cooler in the back of his pick-up. Out of curiosity, he opens the cooler to check out his parcel.

"What!" Slamming the cooler lid shut in disbelief,

he walks back to the front porch and plops down on the steps for a moment to regain his composure.

After a minute or so, he returns to his truck. Gradually he lifts the lid and peeks in. This time he grabs the head by its hair and pulls it out of the cooler to get a good look. This is no head of a mutant dog; this is the head of a full-grown man.

With the head of a human man still in his grip, he marches to the barn to see what has happened to the rest of the mad dog he had killed the night before. A headless corpse lies where the body of the killer dog should be. The corpse is completely naked except for a fur belt around the waist. He drops the head. It rolls away, coming to a stop against the body of his lifeless mare.

Dan pulls the pick from the back of the headless corpse and pushes on the shoulder with his boot to roll it over. The almost naked cadaver is spread out before his feet. The fur belt tied around the midsection of the headless corpse bewilders him. When he stoops down to feel the fur of the belt it causes shivers to storm through his body. All of his senses are excited by the touch of the fur belt. He pulls the belt off the dead man's body with such great force that the entire body flips back over.

Stepping back to admire his prize, he trips over the detached head. As he leans down to pick up the head resting against his slain mare, his thoughts turn back to his innocent animals that had lost their lives the night before. Unable to comprehend why he has the body of human instead of a dog; he attempts to erase last evening's events and turns his attention to burying the dead.



## CHAPTER TWO

Before Dan commences with this dirty job he decides to hang onto the fur belt, throwing it over his shoulder for safekeeping. One at a time he drags the corpses out of the barn with a heavy log chain wrapped around their mid-section, pulling them with his tractor to a grove of aspen trees behind the barn. Each time he drags another dead body to the makeshift gravesite, he leaves another layer of blood and bits of flesh scattered across the rock-strewn terrain.

The cover provided by a stand of Colorado aspens makes a perfect place to do his dirty work, but the irony of the vibrant colors of the autumn leaves against the crisp blue sky makes a mockery of his dark chore this morning. As he rests against the tractor fender trying to formulate his next move, the peaceful scene of his cattle grazing carelessly beyond the seldom traveled dirt road gives him a moment of reprieve from his macabre task.

His neighbor's pick-up truck barreling past on the dirt road, leaving a trail of dust billowing behind, ends his short break. Dan hurries to finish his work before the cool morning turns into the heat of the afternoon. He piles the carcasses into a single shallow grave, but before putting the head in with the rest of corpses, he gives it one long, last look. The sandy-brown-haired thirty-something male conjures up no memory for him. After dropping the head down in the middle of the pile of dead flesh, he gets back

into the driver's seat of his tractor to push the dirt back over the bodies. The dead bodies are tangled up together as the dirt is forced over the top of the shallow grave.

Even with the use of his heavy equipment, this morning's workout has broken his wound wide open. Still running on animal instinct, he turns his thoughts to self-preservation. With no first aid supplies left in his first aid kit, he takes off his t-shirt and wraps it around the outside of his jeans to slow down the bleeding.

The shock load from what has happened to him since he went to bed last night has made him oblivious to his appearance. Even with his t-shirt tied across his thigh like a bandage, the blood still trickles down his leg. By the time he reaches Kremmling, one leg of his jeans is completely blood soaked and the flow of blood has oozed into his boot.

His boot squeaks with every step he takes, leaving a trail of bloody boot prints across the parking lot. Looking like a casualty of war as he enters the drugstore, he notices several customers standing in awe, obviously afraid to say anything to him. As he makes his way back to the first-aid aisle, the customers move out of his way.

At the checkout counter Frank, the owner, runs Dan's items across the scanner. While Frank is bagging Dan's supplies, his curiosity can't take it anymore and he blurts out, "My God man, what happened?"

Dan sighs and takes a quick glance down at his clothes. Not realizing until now what a sight he is makes him blush. Leaning over the counter towards Frank, he answers in a soft voice, trying to avoid any further attention to himself. "Sorry. The way I look was the last thing on my mind. You won't believe this, but a wild dog attacked me and my livestock last night."

Frank hands Dan the bag of first-aid products. "Did

you get the dog that caused it?”

“Yeah.” Dan slips his change in his front pocket. “I got it, but it got me first.” Dan continues to blush from such attention directed his way. “As you can see, it got in some pretty good licks too.”

Waiting in line behind Dan is his neighbor, Jack Donaldson, who revives an old argument. “You got what you deserved, dumbass. If you’d listen to me, you would have killed those wolves on site and they wouldn’t have attacked you because they would’ve already been dead.”

The loud blusterous voice coming from behind exposes the painful memory of his father. Just for a moment, Dan hears his father’s voice barking at him, ‘*You dumb-ass, can’t you do anything right?*’ Just for a spilt second he is nine years old again, and he ducks his head down and draws his shoulders in, ready for his dad to smack the back of his head.

Already on edge from the ordeal he had suffered from the deadly attack on his livestock, Dan’s anger overheats when the humiliation of his childhood is drudged up. Dan turns around and shoves the old man hard enough to make him stumble backward a few steps before he can catch his balance.

“Listen old man, I said it was a wild dog. If you would take your head out of your ass you might hear better. I’m not like you; I don’t kill everything that crosses my property. And another thing, I know it was you that shot my dog last year.” Dan squares off in front of Jack with his fists clenched, waiting for an excuse to deck his belligerent neighbor.

Jack stands with his mouth hanging open, sucking air. As a precaution he steps back, just out of Dan’s reach before responding to that acquisition. “If I did, it was

because that animal didn't belong on my property."

Frank steps out from behind the counter to referee, positioning himself between Dan and Jack. "Come on. Let's not let this get out of hand." Frank turns to Dan, putting his hand on his shoulder. "This isn't like you to be so hostile; I never heard you say a harsh word to anyone before." Frank's eyes focus on Dan's wound. "You need to call the doc and have him look at that wound. You might need stitches. Just settle down and get that checked out. OK?"

Dan turns his back on Jack and heads for the door. "Thanks for caring, Frank. I'll be OK."

Dan takes his friend's advice and stops by Dr. Jackson's office. As soon as he steps inside the doctor's office, the receptionist, Jessie, jumps up from her seat and yells, "Oh my God!" Running out from behind the counter into the lobby, she pulls out a wheelchair tucked away in the corner and rolls it up behind Dan.

Dan's male ego balks at such treatment, and he raises his hand in protest. "Please, it just looks bad. I can walk." Then he continues to amble towards the receptionist's window, waiting for Jessie to return to her position behind the counter.

Once Jessie returns to her position, she greets Dan with a slightly red face. "Sorry, but you look awful. You should go to the hospital. What happened to you?"

"It looks worse than it is. A wild dog attacked me. As you can see, I was at the losing end of the fight for a while." Dan leans against the counter; the day is beginning to take its toll and the loss of blood is making him woozy. "Is the doc available?"

"Of course, he is always available for emergencies. Have a seat. I'll see if he can fit you in next."

Sprawled out in the first available seat, Dan closes

his eyes for a little rest. His wound is still oozing blood; the blood soaked jeans are leaking into the upholstery.

It is only a matter of minutes before Jessie returns to the patient lobby. Holding the door open for Dan and carrying his medical chart, she says, “Dan, come on back. Dr. Jackson will see you in just a few minutes.”

When he stands up, both of their eyes turn to the bloodstain left on the couch. “Come on, the Doctor is waiting.” Jessie waves her hand at the freshly stained couch. “Don’t worry about that. You just worry about getting better.”

Dan ambles towards Jessie, hunched over like an old man. Still feeling a little woozy, he grabs the doorpost to steady himself. “Sorry,” he mumbles as he stumbles through the doorway.

Dr. Jackson has Dan’s chart open and is scanning the notes Jessie wrote for him as Dan enters the examination room. “Haven’t seen you in a few years. Must have been before your dad passed away, the last time I saw you.”

“Probably.”

The doc sets the chart on the counter and scoots his stool closer to the examination table. “How’s your mom doing down in Arizona?”

“Great, I think she is going through a second childhood; her and Aunt Janet have been hitting the senior social scene pretty hard since she moved down to Phoenix.”

The first thing the doc tends to is cutting away the blood-soaked jeans to check on Dan’s wound. “Jessie said you got attacked by a dog. Is that right?”

Jessie slips through the door and takes her position next to Dr. Jackson’s side, ready to anticipate his every move.

Dan props himself up on his elbows to get a better

view of what the doc is doing before he answers, “Yeah, I think it was a wild dog.”

Dr. Jackson pulls the old bandage off. Dan lies back down; the sharp pain from the doc pulling the old bandage off makes him lightheaded. Dr. Jackson continues, “Do you think it was rabid?” Jessie moves the side table within Dr. Jackson’s reach. She has laid out a suture pack for him and disposes of the blood-soaked bandage.

Dan gets back up on his elbows to sneak a peek at his wound. “No,” he says, scrunching up his face in awe when he gets a view of his swollen and torn flesh. “That’s beginning to look nasty.”

“I’ll give the medical opinions, if you don’t mind.” Dr. Jackson pours antiseptic over the wound. “But nasty is a pretty close description.”

Dan closes his eyes and clenches his teeth to keep from screaming. Dr. Jackson dabs the remaining antiseptic with a sterile piece of gauze. “Did you catch the dog that did this?” Jessie holds the wastebasket out for the doc to drop the spent gauze into.

“I killed it.” Dan yelps from the sting of the antiseptic.

“Good.” Dr. Jackson waits for the antiseptic to dry a little before he lays a clean piece of gauze over the wound. Opening a sterile packet of sutures, he continues, “Bring in the head of the animal so we can check it for rabies.”

“Can’t, I cremated the animal.” Lying to cover his tracks, Dan knows he couldn’t bring in the head of a human without being arrested for murder. No one would believe his story.

“Sorry to hear that.” Dr. Jackson injects the area around the wound with a local anesthetic.

“Hey!” Dan yells. “Next time warn me if you’re

going to stick me.” Dan lies back down, not wanting to see the rest of what the doc is going to do.

“Afraid we’ll have to start rabies shots immediately.”