

## Wild Kingdom

By  
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Doris Preston gave her husband, Milt Owen, a *look*.

When Milt didn't immediately comprehend the severity of his blunder, Doris counted to one and elaborated. "Milt, that look means I think you slipped your leash and possibly need restraints. Why would I want to go to a convention of police chiefs, even if it was held in Paradise?"

Milt blinked. Doris' voice had an edge to it. Gently he remarked, "I thought it might be fun. We might learn some new stuff that could be useful." Doris' expression was like that of a full sized poodle when it sees a tea-cup poodle from the first time: A curious amalgam of shock, fear and horrified fascination.

"Milt, don't tell me you're one of those cops who thinks forensic technology has made a science out of police work. *Please* tell me it ain't so."

"Don't be silly. You know I don't. I just think it never hurts to keep up on what's going on." He shrugged almost apologetically and added, "Besides, I've never been to Las Vegas and I'd like to see it some day."

The wistful look he had didn't go unnoticed. Doris sighed and shook her head. "Milt, if you want to go to Vegas, book us a flight and let's go. But don't ask me to go to a convention of police chiefs where the male/female ratio of chiefs is higher than twenty to one. I'd spend entirely too much of my time fending off fanny patters and put-down artists."

Doris got up from their kitchen table and grabbed an empty coffee cup and poured herself one last cup before heading back to work at the station. As chief of police for the small, Oregon coast community of Toledo, she had found it a whole lot easier to run the station if she kept regular hours.

Milt didn't have time for another cup. As chief of police for the neighboring town of Newport, he had an extra seven miles to drive before he'd be back at his own police station. "Well, it was just a thought. What with the new DNA testing, Internet and on-line police databases, we can save a lot of time in an investigation. Maybe even get to come home early once in a while."

Doris drank about half of her coffee in one, throat stretching go. She really didn't need the caffeine – stronger stimulants before an afternoon of frolicking police work were needed. Thank Glod. "Well, I think it's a lot more efficient to know people. How they think – if ever – what they're liable to do given an an opening more than a quarter inch wide."

Milt, busy donning his jacket replied, "Well, yeah, that's true. I can't argue that at all. The trouble is, you can't know everybody in a town, even as small as Toledo. There's just too many people."

Doris cocked her head. "Almost true enough. I know a *lot* of people in this town. In Newport, too. But when that fails, that's when knowing *how* people think comes in handy." As she drank the last of the coffee and dumped the cup in the sink, Milt headed toward the door – only to come up short when the phone rang. He turned to look at Doris as she answered, "Preston."

"Doris, we got a situation," came a crisp, business-like reply. Sounded like Mort of all people. She grabbed a pen and paper.

"What situation, Mort?"

Mort took a deep breath. "Domestic disturbance, with shots fired. In Alder lane ..."

Doris swore softly, put the pen down and leaned against the drain board. "How long ago?" She didn't need the address.

"Not more than five minutes."

“Who’s on it?”

“Jimmy’s al – “

“Call in Fred. I want him to take your place and you to head to back up Jimmy as soon as Fred shows. Tell him I said warp speed.”

Mort paused again and then in a softer voice, “It’s the Unger’s place, I think.”

“No doubt. Unger just got out of stir two days ago.”

“Do you want me to get help from the state police?”

“*No!*” Doris snapped. She paused, sighed and added in a much nicer tone, “I’ll handle it. Call Jerry Swann and tell him I want him and Martha to meet me there as quickly as they can. And I didn’t mean to jump down your throat, Mort. My apologies. Now let’s get things rolling.” Doris dumped the phone receiver into it’s cradle and made a bee-line for the closet to grab stuff, then headed for the desk near the bay window.

Milt looked at her, puzzled. The conversation half he’d been able to hear didn’t make much sense. Actually, he reflected, if he’d both sides, it probably wouldn’t have made any sense either. “Anything you need me on?”

Doris shook her head as she checked her gun, pulling the magazine and swapping it for one from the second drawer down on her desk. She chambered a round and pocketed the magazine she’d just pulled. “No, shouldn’t take too long. Bloody damn nuisance more than anything.”

Milt nodded somewhat relieved, and watched her head out. Suddenly, he frowned. A nuisance that might require a special magazine?

He checked the second drawer and found a magazine of 9mm rubber bullets. Milt gazed at the now closing front door and then shrugged. How did anybody in their right mind ever end up in this job? Or marry anybody in this line of work.

[::-]

1447 Alder Lane Loop was on a hill as was all of Alder, Cedar, Spruce and Smith Streets. Jimmy Hartman had been cruising in the area when the report of shots had been phoned in; he rolled up not more than a couple of minutes later. As he had gotten out of the squad car, he heard a pop-snap and the passenger-side window starred, hit by a low caliber bullet. Jimmy's training took over without a hitch and he ducked down behind the car, one hand grabbing for the radio while he cautiously scanned for the shooter.

There – a sheer fluttered in a window left of the front door and Jimmy thought he could see a figure behind the opened window. He targeted the window and switched the mike to PA. “In the house. This is the police.” *Who the hell else would it be*, he thought, *crouched down behind a car with a roto beam flashing, using a PA system? The milkman? Jeez, what a stupid thing to say.* “Throw out your weapon and come out with your hands up.” *Right, and then we'll go have a beer.*

*Crack-pop!* The window on the squad car gave up the ghost and shattered inward. Now that was the answer he expected. He switched from PA and raised Meg, the dispatcher, quickly reporting the situation. Inside of fifteen seconds Meg ID'd the place and started to give him some background.

Owned by Owen Unger. Wife, Mary. Two daughters, ages thirteen and eleven. One cat – *who the hell cares if there's a cat* – Jimmy thought. Unger just got out of jail in Salem the day before yesterday. Was on parole and was under a restraining order: No visitation.

Jimmy went cold. Jesus, this was going to get nasty.

Meg rambled on – Doris on her way. Mort headed there as soon as Fred took over the station. No state police coming, by Doris' order. *Ohmigod, Doris. We're going to need help here. Don't get your back up!*

Jimmy switched to PA again. “You can’t get out the front and more police are on the way. You won’t have a chance to run. Let’s slow everything down and think things through.”

*Snap-pop*, but there was no hit on the squad car. Must’ve been a target inside the house. Jimmy started getting visions of some poor woman down on the carpet, bleeding. “Unger! Owen! Take it easy and nobody has to get hurt. Now throw out your gun.” Jimmy heard the screech in the distance, behind him at the base of the hill and a floodgate of relief washed over him. That’d be Doris. She only lived a mile away.

He kept his eyes on the house as he heard a man’s voice, yelling back at him. “Throw out the gun? You crazy son-of-a-bitch! I don’t *have* a gun. Mary’s got the gun. She’s going to blow my damn head off if you don’t shut up and leave her alone.”

Jimmy froze. What the hell?

A second squad car came to a shuddering stop behind his and Doris emerged in a crouch, making good time. In but a second she was beside him and taking the mike. “Owen? You okay?”

“Doris, is that you?”

“Yeah. You hurt?”

“Christ *yes*! I’m hurt.”

“I’ll say he is. Next one’s going to be six inches higher and in the middle. Teach that son-of-a ...”

“Mary, will you shut *up*! I ain’t talking to you yet. Where’d you take it, Owen?”

“Leg ...” Owen’s voice cracked slightly and it trailed off for a moment. “Above the knee.” They heard what must have been a pained chuckle ending in a gasp. “Missed the knee, though. She never could shoot worth beans.”

“Oh, yeah,” a woman’s voice screamed. “How about I put one through your balls. That’s right here, right?” There came an agonized scream, choked off and Doris winced.

“Lay off that stuff, Mary. You’re going to make me mad and you don’t want that. Now, both of you, shut up.” Doris looked behind her, then back down the road, muttering, “Come on, Jerry, get here.” She looked at Jimmy suddenly. “Work yourself around the back. I don’t think she’ll try to run; she too pissed off right now. But she might think of it in five minutes or so. *Don’t* present a target. She may be a terrible shot right-handed, but I doubt she’s shooting right-handed. Blind drunk and left-handed, she can hit a nickel at fifty paces.”

Jimmy shook his head, clearly confused, but did as he was told, making a sudden break down the street, stopping after two houses and going into a yard. It had a wooden fence and no visible gate so he went over it, sending three toy poodles into quivering fits.

A back gate was in the middle of the fence and he ran for it, coming out on a dirt track that might have been confused for an alley if one were both blind and stupid. Basically, somebody ran a truck through there a couple of times a year, more or less to discourage blackberries which were, at present, undiscouraged and thigh high. Cursing to himself, Jimmy plunged on.

At the front, Doris got a status report from Meg; Fred would be in the station in another couple of minutes and Mort was ready to head out. Doris could tell Meg thought Doris was nuts to want Mort within a hundred yards of what was going on, but she squelched her. Mort was crucial to what she had in mind. “Get an ambulance on the way. Owen Unger’s been shot. I think we may be able to shut this down without anyone else getting hurt, but somebody’s going to need to look after him.”

“Okay, got it.” Meg keyed in. “Jerry’s got Martha with him and said to tell you it was going to cost. He didn’t appreciate getting hauled out of bed.”

“This late?”

“He’s hung over, too.”

“Judas Priest. Okay, I get the picture. Stick tight. I’ll let you know what else we need.” Faintly, in the background, Doris the sound of a seven cylinder V8 with blown glasspacs and relaxed minutely. To

herself she muttered, “Well, no wonder he’s in a rotten mood. He still hasn’t got enough money to get that Camaro fixed.” She just hoped that it wouldn’t tick Martha off too much. Martha could be mean.

Which brought her back to mean Mary. “Okay, Mary. Here’s what we got. You’re in there, about to blow the head off your no-good husband, in front of your two daughters. You want to do that, really? Not much of a mama, are we?”

*Crack-pop, snap-pop.* Now Doris’ squad car had a window out. “Lovely, Mary,” Doris muttered, wincing at the damage.

“Who’s a no-good ...”

“Shut-up, Owen. You are. Now Mary, you can’t get out; Jimmy’s got the back covered and I’m not going anywhere. However, there’s a sale on and I’ve got shopping to do for the week and you’re making me miss it. What do you think I should do to resolve this mess?”

There was a pause and then a hopeful “Go away? How about that?”

“And miss seeing someone stitch Owen up with a needle and thread. Don’t be silly. Any other ideas?”

Another pause. Much longer than the first. “How about I just blow his head off and then come on out?”

“Jesus, Doris – will you watch what you’re saying, here? She’ll do it ...”

“Hell, Owen, I might just hold you for her. Nah, can’t now that I think about it. Set a bad precedent. Scratch that idea, Mary.”

More silence. “Well, try this on for size,” Doris continued, looking up at the sky and idly watching the plume of smoke from the Georgia-Pacific mill waft its way east, almost directly above them. “How about you coming on out on your own?”

Beat, beat. *Snap-pop*. The back seat passenger side window starred on Doris' squad car. "I'll take that as a no, shall I?" Doris said. "Even if I let you knock him around some after you give me the gun? That's about the best I can do?"

Doris waited; it was worth a shot, so to speak. "Not again," howled Owen.

"*Shut up!* Owen. It kept you breathing the last time. Seems to me a broke nose, a shiner and a couple of loose teeth are worth it."

Silence again. From down the hill came the sound of Jerry Swann finally chugging up the hill, his Camaro belching a thin trail of smoke.

"Can't do it," Mary finally answered. "If I gotta spend more time in stir, I want to make it worth while."

Doris figured she'd take that attitude. Glancing down the hill, Mort's squad car came into view, rapidly overhauling the rust-mangled Camaro. "Well, think it over some, will you Mary? We got time. You just think it over."

Mort passed Swann and slid to a stop behind Doris' car. For once, he looked like he knew what he was doing – he kept low and joined her with a grimly expectant look. Seconds later, a burly man with three days growth of five o'clock shadow, wearing a red tank top t-shirt and cutoffs got out. He coughed deeply and spat, before taking a drag off a cigarette. He next reached in behind the front seat and pulled a large burlap sack free. The muscles on his arms and shoulders bunched with effort. Once he had the sack out of the car he grabbed it with both hands. Whatever it was, it was heavy.

Jerry Swann was forty-three and had been a logger and fisherman before they opened up the card rooms in Newport. Now he made what money he needed dealing blackjack and once in awhile, delivering furniture for a brother-in-law. Doris could remember him from when she was a Junior High student and he was a star end for the Toledo High football team. She'd thought he was neat stuff; now she figured he was a nice enough guy but something of a lush and awfully thick on one shoulder.

He hacked again and spat something darkly disgusting out into the gutter before he walked, bold as life over to where Doris and Mort were crouched. “Je-zus, Doris. Why did you have to call ...”

Doris grabbed him by the belt on one side as Mort did on the other and together they jerked him off his feet. He landed clumsily and moaned, clutching his head. A string of profanity, mindlessly repeated like a mantra, wafted from him.

None too soon. Mary let off two more rounds, the first going over the top of the car and hitting a bird feeder in the yard behind them. The second creased the roof of Doris’ rig and hit the T11 siding of the vacant house behind them.

“Shut up, Jerry! We can discuss terms later. How’s Martha?”

Still groaning softly, he blinked at Doris with glassy yet blood-shot eyes. “She’s fine. A bit touchy, but fine.”

“Good. We’ll have her back to you in two shakes.” Doris pointed to the burlap sack. “Okay, Mort. Now you get to use that speed and upper-body strength you’re always telling Meg about.”

Mort nodded, but looked at the bag, puzzled. “What ...”

“Never you mind. Here’s what I want you to do. I’m going to keep Mary occupied and I want you to make your way to the right side of the house. See that side window?”

Mort took a quick look. “Yeah.”

“Chuck this through the window – I don’t care how. Break the window open if you have to. Are you tall and strong enough to get it through that window?” Mort looked at the window and hefted the sack. After a moment he nodded.

Jerry had been quietly miserable, listening, but suddenly understood what Doris had in mind. “Oh, no! Jesus Christ, Doris, she’ll be pissed off for a week. She hates it when you do stuff like that to her.”

“Well, the two of you’ll just have to put up with it. I don’t turn you two over to the feds and you help me out once in a while. That was the deal.”

Jerry nodded ruefully. Making deals with Doris tended to have long range implications that you never counted on.

Mort had not a clue. But Doris had given him an order and he, by God, was going to do it. He hefted the sack again and nodded to himself. "Okay, let's do it."

"Right. Now I'm going to get her talking and make her think I've lost my patience. When I shoot, you start, okay?"

"Got it."

"Mary! It's getting late and I'm going to miss that sale if you keep this up. Let's just call the whole thing off. Pitch your gun out."

*Snap-pop.* Doris cursed, louder than she intended. The mayor was going to have a fit when he got the bill for the squad cars. "Damn it, Mary. Stop shooting the car. Cost money to repair those blasted holes ..."

*Snap-pop,* three times in quick succession. The right tire on Doris' squad car blew. "I warned you..." Doris snapped off a shot, followed by three evenly spaced ones, about three seconds apart. She started out high, taking out the window in a shower of glass, wood and ancient putty. The second and third would have been about head high had there been anybody still standing in the house. The fourth went into the wall through the window about shoulder high, embedding itself in the three-quarter inch sheet-rock.

Mort was as fast as he'd always claimed. He was halfway across the lawn by the time the second shot came, the burlap sack over his back. He was at the side of the house by shot three. From there, he kept low and made his way to the nearer of the three windows on that side.

The sill hit Mort about the middle of the chest and he took a quick look inside. There was an open doorway, which he figured opened onto the hall connecting to the front room. Mort grabbed the window and unsurprisingly, found that it was locked. He shifted the now gently squirming sack to his

left hand and pulled out his baton. It was but a second's work to smash in the window and he dropped the baton and grabbed the sack with his other hand.

He hoisted it with a grunt; whatever was in there was not happy and squirming around in a most muscular way. Mort managed to get it on the sill, lifted it further and then chucked the sack onto a bed a couple of feet away and where it paused for a second before tumbling off on the other side.

He could hear Doris yelling. "Hear that, Mary? I want you to meet Martha, Jerry Swann's good friend and pet. She's a bit unhappy about getting thrown into the house, though, so you might want to come out now. She's really very sweet tempered for a reticulated python, all ten —"

"Eleven," Jerry amended.

"—eleven feet of her."

Silence.

Then an agonized, terrified scream as Doris slouched back against the car. Jerry looked at her. Doris shrugged. "Mary's not partial to snakes."

There was a crash and then a medium height, rather muscular looking woman with wild and frizzy black hair rolled on the grass, still screaming occasionally. She made it to her feet, was across the street and dove across the hood of Doris' squad car, slid off at speed and landed in a heap up against an arborvitae hedge.

Jerry looked at the panicked woman for a moment and then patted his pockets, pulled out two Camel Filter cigarettes in a thankfully crush-proof box and handed one to Mary. He lit hers and then his and the three of them just kind of sat there looking at each other.

"Why couldn't you just have waited for me to show up and referee, like the time before last," Doris asked. She regarded the woman for a moment and then muttered, "You've been working out, I see."

"Yeah, but I still smoke and got no wind. Owen can still take me in a fair fight."

Jerry nodded sagely. He had that problem himself.

Mort had watched almost three of yards of sleek snake meander into the hallway with mounting thankfulness that he had had no idea he'd been toting around a gunny sack of snake, rather than Idaho potatoes. Like Mary, he was less than partial to snakes in general and possibly this one in particular, which explained why he was currently leaning against the sill and holding on for dear life. The ground seemed to want to suck him right down.

Jimmy heard the racket break out, correctly identifying the breaking of window panes and then had no trouble recognizing the sincerity of the screaming that ensued. Once he heard what sounded like a dull thud on the ground, followed by rapid footsteps and then a swooshing sound ending in grunts of panicked pain, he entered the backyard and looked in through screen door into the kitchen.

The two girls were not alone. The younger of the two was holding out a Ballpark Frank to Martha, who was coiled prettily on the kitchen table. The elder girl was rummaging around in the refrigerator, found what she was looking for and then gravely offered a KFC chicken leg to Martha, who demurely accepted it. The chicken leg began a slow march down Martha's throat and the younger girl said, as she once again offered the frank to the snake, "Think we can keep her?"

Martha accepted the proffered snack and if anything looked hopeful that a place could be found for her. The older girl, her bright red hair framing a sad expression, shook her head. "Nah, you heard Doris. That Jerry'll want her back."

The three now good friends regarded each other tranquilly while the faint song of a siren became audible, the Toledo EMTs making their way across the equally tranquil causeway of the East Yaquina slough, the natural incidental music of a modern wild kingdom.