

HYBRID

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First print

All Characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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I would like to dedicate this book to my amazing family for their support and belief in me over the years, especially my mum for encouraging my love of stories from a young age and my cousin 'Lady' Sarah for getting me started on Hybrid all those years ago.

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Nick

Prologue

The late autumn sun glares down upon the land, creating pools of light and shadow amongst the tree trunks and in the undergrowth. A chill wind whispers through the woods, a hint of what is soon to come in the winter months. Shivering, you quicken your pace, eager to be home, listening to the sound of your own footsteps crunching through the blanket of leaves that covers the floor.

Clouds lazily drift across the sun, casting yet more shadows through the trees. The woods suddenly seem a hostile place, as if something is lurking in the undergrowth, something that doesn't belong, something deadly. You can't shake the feeling you're being watched. You thought you were alone but can you be so sure? The woods hide many creatures, but the sense that something other than the natural wildlife is crouching in the shadows cannot be ignored. You can feel eyes following you as you walk, eyes that do not belong to any known creature on the planet. Fear begins to take its deadly hold, slowly tightening its grip upon your heart and squeezing until it becomes painful, until you feel your heart will stop. But what is it you fear the most? Do you fear the death that you feel awaits you, the pain, the unseen creature itself?

Movement alarms you and you begin to run, fearing for your life. Whatever it is, can you outrun it? Unbidden, images flash before your eyes, all those horror movies you've seen, the horror stories of man-eating animals you've heard, and your own lifeless body lying broken and bloody on the ground, hidden by the leaves, slowly rotting away and fed upon by the creatures of the woods. Fear spurs you on to a greater speed.

You're being followed now; you can hear something behind you but what is it? Through the panic, you're dimly aware that it doesn't make any noise running through the leaves, yet you can hear some creature behind you. Something darts out in front of you, causing you to cry out. The bird quickly seeks refuge in a nearby tree, followed by others of its kind. You stop running and double up with laughter, laughing at your own fear, allowing your imagination to get the better of you. Birds. It was only birds.

You start to walk again, still laughing and shaking your head at your own stupidity. But something still isn't quite right and you pause again. The world is still and silent. Shouldn't those birds be singing now? With a shrug you continue walking. Who knows what goes on in the minds of animals? Perhaps they fell silent in fear after you startled them.

Clouds are massing in the sky overhead, black and threatening, casting the woods entirely in shadow. There's no denying the hostility of the world around you. Maybe there is something other than birds here after all.

Leaves crunch behind you. Not your imagination this time, you are definitely being followed. But is it human or animal? Both seem equally as frightening.

Your head whips round in an attempt to spy the stalker, but only plant life meets your eyes. Another sound – it's in front of you now. And gone when your head spins back round to meet it. A human couldn't move that fast... The thought isn't very comforting. Can you outsmart the creature in its own habitat?

Running again, you see movement in the shadows: a darker shadow than those cast by the trees, weaving between trunks, keeping pace with you. Definitely an animal of some description but not one belonging to Britain. A quick glance is enough to tell you it's bigger than any other predator native to the country and your fear intensifies. You lose sight of it, the black shape seemingly melting into its surroundings, but you keep running, knowing it could be moving in for the kill.

Precious time trickles by but the creature is gone. Just as you think you're safe and begin to slow, a shape steps out from between the trees. But it isn't an animal this time.

Shock and confusion brings you to a standstill and you face the stranger, chest heaving as your body craves more oxygen.

A man stands before you. There is a feral look about him: his dark hair is a mess, long and unkempt, and long stubble covers his face, just short of a couple of day's growth needed to be called a beard. His wild eyes belong to a madman at first, but as you watch they become cold and merciless, like the eyes of a killer, before seemingly growing warmer, more human perhaps. You cannot hold his gaze for long, for you can feel a great hunger burning in them, always there despite the changes you just witnessed. He is barely wearing any clothes, naked from the waist up. What rags remain around his legs are torn and covered in filth, and you can't be sure but they appear to be stained in blood. His eyes are narrowed while he surveys you, his top lip curling slightly to bare sharp yellow teeth, pieces of raw flesh caught between them. On any other man it would be described as an expression of contempt, but in this case it appears to be more of a snarl.

I look at you and I smell your fear. It calls to me as the hunger eats away at my insides, urging me to hunt. I see it in your eyes now, the fear is taking over. So hungry. And yet, something holds me back this time. Memories rise from the murky depths of my mind, corpses rising up from their watery grave. Memories of the human world. How long has it been now? Weeks? Months? Years? I don't know, but I remember... And I want to be part of that world again. I take a step towards you, so close now that you can smell the stench of flesh and blood on my breath. You're praying it's the blood of animals, but deep down you know that it is not. You want to run, but you seem to be glued to the spot. You find you want to know more about this strange man, in spite of yourself.

I try to speak but it's been so long, all I manage is a grunt. Frowning, I embrace the memories now, searching for the forgotten knowledge, trying to find the secret to forming the words to this forgotten language, the key to this forgotten world. It's been so long, but I remember a time when I was a part of that world, and finally my tongue forms words I thought I'd buried along with my past.

I tell you not to fear for the little good it does. I will not harm you. So many things I tried to forget, but I will never be free of those memories. Words cannot describe the horrors I have known, nor the torment I have endured, but I find the need to tell someone, and I shall seek to relate them to you as best I can. I've been alone for so long, isolated from the world, no longer a part of your world but not a part of theirs. I tried turning to the natural world for a time but I do not belong there. Your world fears me, my world turned their back on me, and I am alone. I long to be part of man's world again, to see my family if they are still alive. Maybe it's too late for that now. Have I outlived them all, everyone I knew in my former life?

I have been haunted by these memories for so long, keeping them locked inside my skull for what seems an eternity, but now it is time to release them. I have to tell someone; I cannot go on any longer like this.

It starts to rain. Thunder rumbles across the sky and lightning streaks through the clouds. Come, I will take you to shelter where you can listen to my tale while the storm rages. Please? I don't want to be alone any longer.

You look at me, distrust evident in your eyes, but pity stirs your heart and, though you should know better, you follow me to a cave, carved long ago into a rocky outcrop somewhere near the heart of the woods. You help me start a fire and settle down on the floor opposite me, with only the dancing flames between us. Now, where to begin? I search my memory for the right place to start. Everything is so confused, but thinking is slowly becoming easier. You act as a catalyst, reminding me of the life I once had, and slowly the memories begin to make more sense, form some kind of order. Yes, the tale,

or at least the part of which I will tell this day, began in a small Northern town in Yorkshire, here in Britain. I must warn you that my story is not for the faint of heart or those with a weak stomach. I will make your skin crawl and your blood curdle, and I swear to you it is all true. So long have I lived in secrecy, but a new era is dawning, I feel it, and the age of the undead is almost upon us. For it is their world to which I should belong. Most men are ignorant of our existence, yet exist we do. So then, now you are sitting comfortably, it began in my hometown at the beginning of September, in the year 2003. I was still at school then, and we must start with the last day of the summer holidays just before I was about to enter my final year at high school, preparing to take my GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) exams at the end of the year.

Chapter One - My Entrance into Lycanthropy

The lights were still on red but the green man had just disappeared and they would change in a matter of minutes. I'd never had much patience, and I certainly wasn't going to wait for them to change again, so I sprinted across the road before the traffic started moving. A car had already been creeping forward, and just as I ran out the driver had decided to put his foot down. I couldn't stop in the middle of the road once I'd decided to go, so I kept my head down and sprinted onwards, feeling my glasses slide down my nose. The driver beeped his horn but didn't bother to slam on the brakes, and I barely made it across. I gave him the finger as he drove away in disgust.

I pushed my glasses back up my nose and walked away, calm despite the fact I could have been in the back of an ambulance by then, staring Death in the face. As I walked I entertained thoughts of the alternate realities theory, thinking if it were true I was probably long dead in at least a hundred alternate universes already. As a teenager I was somewhat reckless and I took stupid risks, and somewhere I was sure I'd paid the price. The thought didn't trouble me, mortal as I once was, since we were all headed for the grave eventually. I knew my time would come and it didn't matter to my younger self whether that was in hours or years.

Most of the girls at school were obsessed with eating healthy and their figure. I used to think, why bother? I saw no point in being so careful to avoid Death all your life when he would catch every one of us eventually. People talked of uncertain futures and being unsure of where they were going in life. As a human I knew where I was going. I knew where we were all going. I just didn't know how any of us were getting there or how long it would take. But regardless of how often I contemplated my mortality, I don't think I truly believed my life would end anytime soon. I didn't fear Death, and I didn't expect him to catch up with me for many years to come. I was still young and care free, and so very much alive. My dark thoughts turned to those more typical of a teenage boy as my feet automatically carried me towards home, which was just as well since I hadn't really been paying attention to the route I was taking.

Before I knew it I was walking down the drive to our house, and only then did I notice both cars were missing, meaning my parents were out. Dad was probably at the gym, but I had no idea where Mum could be. She wasn't shopping because she had just sent me out for a few supplies, and she wasn't working, since she worked in the same school my sister and I went to and it was still the summer holidays, albeit the last day. Not that her whereabouts really mattered. Having the house to myself for the afternoon was all that mattered to me back then, since it meant I could watch horror movies rated eighteen or play online games without being interrupted. Dad didn't like me watching horror films as it was; he thought they were 'morbid', and had once said they were 'poisoning my mind'. But I was fascinated with the horror genre and I wasn't going to miss out just because he couldn't understand it.

I felt in my pocket for the house keys and unlocked the door, trying to decide what to do with my hour or so of freedom as I dumped the bags in the kitchen. But I was soon disappointed to find I wasn't alone after all.

Amy, my younger sister, lay sprawled across the sofa watching TV with the back of her blonde head to me. I'd just assumed she'd be out with Mum when I'd seen the cars missing. She didn't bother to look round when I walked past, but she shouted out "Nick smells!"

At twelve years old she was a typical girly girl and the very definition of 'dumb blonde'. There was plenty of sibling rivalry between us which the raging hormones of puberty had taken to new heights, and we would often wind each other up. Sometimes it was on purpose, sometimes it was just from the tension of spending so much time under

the same roof, but whether intentional or not we would argue often. Yet in spite of all her annoying qualities, she was still my little sister and I loved her, even if there were times when I felt like I wanted to throttle her.

I sighed and looked at the shopping. There was no way I could watch an eighteen DVD with Amy home, since she took great pleasure in grassing me up to our parents whenever she caught me doing something they'd forbidden. There were plenty of other films I could have watched but I decided my time would be better spent on the computer while it was free. However, fate wasn't on my side. Our internet connection had always been somewhat temperamental and it soon became clear that it wasn't going to connect.

Sulkily I ran upstairs, thinking I might watch one of my horrors rated twelve or fifteen after all, or maybe I'd have some time on the Playstation, but first I went into the bathroom for a quick pee. I looked up at the mirror over the sink while I washed my hands, wondering why nothing ever seemed to go my way. Green eyes tinged with brown stared back at me from behind my glasses. They were deep set, under brows that were fairly thick and slightly curved, somewhere halfway between straight and rounded. To my teenage self my lips felt a little too big for my liking, though not ridiculously so like some celebrities. But at least everything else was in proportion.

The overall effect meant that, relaxed, my face was quite serious looking, but more often than not it was grinning when I was out with my mates, or when things did go my way for a change. My face used to be round when I was younger but as puberty went on it was getting to be a little more angular, becoming the face of a young man rather than a boy. Puberty still had a long way to go, however. My beard hadn't started to come through yet and my voice was only just starting to drop.

I glanced back down at the sink to turn the tap off with my long, skinny fingers. I'd always been skinny despite the fact I had a good appetite. There was a little muscle on my arms and shoulders though it didn't look that impressive when I had such a skinny frame. I often wished I was better built, my bones thicker, and I could only hope they would change with puberty.

The muscle on my hairy legs was more impressive. They were skinny too but I had big calves, the legs of a runner. I might not have been one of the strongest guys in our year group at school but I was certainly one of the fastest.

We weren't a particularly tall family but I would have said I was about average height for a fifteen year old. I kept my dark hair short, mostly so I didn't have to do anything with it, or as short as school allowed. In a certain light it looked almost black, but it was actually a dark brown. Back then I thought black would look cooler and intended to start dyeing it eventually, though I hadn't tried any dye as yet.

Black was the preferred colour for my choice of wardrobe too. I generally only ever wore gothic t-shirts with snarling monsters, grim reapers or snakes preparing to strike, that sort of thing. I did have a few animal ones but the gothic shirts were my favourites. I also had a few band shirts that I loved. And I typically wore my black jeans everywhere, even in the height of summer. The only time I wore anything slightly different was when Dad insisted I change into something smarter, or at least less 'morbid'.

I ran my hand through that dark hair, still undecided what to do, but when Amy shouted out something else I headed back downstairs instead. Taunting her seemed like fun at that moment.

As I entered the lounge I could see she was watching one of the music channels, her greenish blue eyes glued to the screen. She had no taste in music as far as I was concerned, often subjecting me to modern pop, dance and hip hop. It was all rubbish to my ears. Much as I loathed the songs blaring out of the TV, I walked past the sofa and flicked her long hair, knowing she really hated that.

“Nick!” she shouted, and kicked out as hard as she could, catching me on the leg.

I laughed and stuck my tongue out at her.

“Just piss off, you’re pathetic!”

“So where’s Mum?” I asked.

“At the doctor’s idiot, she told you God knows how many times before you went to town.”

“Oh yeah,” I said, then groaned and fell back onto the other sofa. “I’m bored!”

“Me too. Hey, get me the phone, I want to try something.”

I looked at her suspiciously. “You get it.”

She tried her little girl act, making a cute face designed to melt people’s hearts. When that didn’t work she gave me a look that said bring it or die.

I sighed and gave in, like I usually did when she asked me to do something. She never did anything for herself, seemingly of the opinion that boys were no more than slaves. The way Dad doted on his ‘little princess’ probably had something to do with that attitude. A pretty girl, she had Mum’s looks and would no doubt grow into a beautiful woman some day. She already had all the boys chasing her in school, and I had no doubt she’d end up with a rich husband when she grew up, who would take over my role of running round after her.

She smirked as I brought her the phone and dialled the numbers one to ten.

“What are you doing?” I asked her.

“Just wondering what happens if I ring one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten,” she replied.

The smirk vanished to be replaced by a look of horror. I thought I could hear a woman’s voice on the other end of the phone but I wasn’t sure. However, she soon started laughing again.

“What? What happened?”

“You try it.”

I did. A recording of a woman’s voice told me the time.

“What’s so funny about that?”

Amy was in a fit of giggles then. I shrugged and looked at the phone, grinning as an idea struck me.

“Hey, I wonder what’ll happen if I dial six, six, six! Think I’ll get through to Hell or maybe the Devil himself?”

The laughter died in her throat. She gave me a look of disgust.

“That’s the most pathetic thing you’ve ever said, geek.”

I shrugged again and dialled the number, unsure of what to expect.

The phone clicked as it tried to connect but nothing else happened. It made a weird buzzing noise but when it became clear nothing more was going to happen I hung up. Amy rolled her eyes at me so I just laughed.

Later that day I sat in the back of the car, Mum and Amy in the front.

“How’d it go at the doctors, Mum?” I asked.

Her greenish brown eyes glanced back at me in the rear view mirror as, with a warm smile, she replied “Fine, thanks Nick. It was just a routine check up.”

Mum was great. She could be strict when she needed to be, but most of the time she was pretty good about letting us do what we wanted. We shared a lot of the same interests and I’d always been much closer to her than I was to my Dad. She liked a lot of science fiction and fantasy, whether it be books, films or TV shows, and she did appreciate some horror as long as it wasn’t too gory.

As previously mentioned Amy got her good looks from our Mum, including her blonde hair, but Mum wasn’t a dizzy blonde like her daughter. She was an intelligent

woman and could be very perceptive at times, which wasn't always a good thing if we were trying to hide something from her. She also had good fashion sense like many women, something else she shared with her daughter, but she didn't feel the need to spend a fortune on designer labels like some. Amy, on the other hand, had no sense when it came to money and had been known to spend birthday or Christmas money within days of receiving it.

Unlike Amy, Mum kept her hair a bit shorter, around shoulder length. She wore glasses for driving but they suited her, and she looked just as beautiful with them as she did without. In fact she looked good in almost anything she wore, whether it be jeans and a t-shirt or a dress.

Amy's McDonald's Happy Meal dominated my senses. Much as I hated McDonald's, I was so hungry I could have eaten anything. The smell of it snaked up my nose, and I watched hungrily as she ate, deliberately eating slow and savouring every mouthful just to wind me up, twisting round in her seat so I could see the fake look of ecstasy on her face. My stomach rumbled and I thought longingly of the meal waiting for me at Leisure X.

I'd arranged to meet up with Lizzy in town and we'd walk to Leisure X (a large complex complete with cinema, restaurants, pubs and an arcade, amongst other things) where we'd be meeting the others. Lizzy was one of my best mates. I'd known her since the first year of high school, when we met in a Science lesson and she'd invited me to sit next to her, since I was alone and she felt sorry for me. I wasn't the most popular guy in our year. I'd always been something of an outcast, alone in the playground at primary school, bullied by the rest of the class. Things hadn't improved much since I'd moved to high school, but at least I was no longer completely alone. Practically all of my friends were girls, but beggars can't be choosers. They could be annoying at times when they chose to discuss all the boring subjects girls like to talk about, but they could also be a good laugh.

I was so distracted by my hunger that I didn't notice when the car came to a stop.

"Come on Nick, are you going or not?" Mum said.

"Oh yeah, cheers," I mumbled, grabbing the jacket I'd slung on the backseat for later, then climbed out of the car.

Lizzy was waiting by a small shop on the main road, her long, bushy, light brown hair tied in a ponytail to keep it out of her blue eyes. She had a round, pretty face though she was quite slim, and despite her good looks I didn't see her in that way. We had always been like brother and sister and always would be.

"Don't be too late back," Mum called out as she drove off. I pretended not to hear and waved goodbye as I walked over to Lizzy and we started heading towards Leisure X, which was on the outskirts of the town.

We came to a stop at the side of the road, waiting to cross. There was a lot of traffic for the time of day. It was evening, well after the rush hour traffic.

"Bollocks to this, we ain't got all day," I muttered impatiently, and before Lizzy could stop me, I stepped out into the road.

I hadn't seen the car speeding towards me, but Lizzy had. She grabbed my arm and pulled me back onto the pavement before it was too late.

"Jesus, Nick! You're gonna get us both killed one of these days."

"We'll die someday anyway. Maybe I will end up splattered across somebody's windscreen, I don't care. Or maybe I'll be flattened on the road by a bus, squashed roadkill," I said, grinning.

"Yeah well, just don't get yourself killed while I'm around 'cause I'm not ready to die trying to save your sorry arse yet, okay?"

"Says she who keeps threatening to slit her wrists," I shot back.

“That’s different,” she replied.

“Yeah, it would be.”

“Anyway, me and the others are taking bets on how you’re gonna die. My bet’s on a car hitting you, alcohol poisoning, or maybe you’ll end up in a padded room if Death doesn’t get you first.”

I laughed at that. “Cheers, I guess there’s hope for me yet. So what film are we seeing tonight?”

“I’m not bothered. There’s only a couple of good films out at the moment. I’m easy either way, whichever one you guys go for.”

It was a choice between two horror films; a werewolf one or some kind of a ghost story. My vote was for the werewolf one. Werewolves had always been my favourite horror movie monster.

“Oh, big news,” Lizzy said excitedly. “This really hot guy just joined the bowling club.”

Bowling had been one of Lizzy’s biggest hobbies for as long as I’d known her. Both she and her brother were members, and regularly played in tournaments. I had a feeling her parents were on the team too and it was a real family thing, but I wasn’t certain. I’m sure she told me at some point but I forget now.

“Yeah?” I said, trying to sound interested, though I really didn’t want to get on the subject of her latest crush. She had her girlfriends for that sort of talk.

“Yep, and I plucked up the courage to ask him his name. Yay me!” she told me.

“And?” I enquired.

“He’s called Ryan. He’s eighteen though. What do you think, too old?” she asked.

“It’s only three years, go for it.” I said, before quickly changing the subject. “So, can you believe this right-wing Christian nut wants to put a ban on pretty much every horror movie out there? I guess a lot of them go against their beliefs and whatnot but come on, nobody’s making them watch.”

“First I’ve heard of it” Lizzy replied.

“Oh yeah, I just happened to overhear it when Mum and Dad had the news on t’other night. Some guy who’s big on the whole Christianity thing. Said he didn’t even believe in Halloween!”

“Personally, I’ve never really believed in God or the Bible.”

“Nah, me neither. God never did owt for me when I needed Him. If He exists, He doesn’t bother to listen. No, I believe in my own mortality and that’s it.”

“So stop taking risks with your life, you idiot,” she said.

I didn’t reply to that and we resumed the journey in silence.

We arrived at Leisure X to find the others waiting for us, six of us in total.

After arguing for a while, it was agreed that, as I had arranged for us all to come, I could pick the film. There was no debate in my mind: it had to be the werewolf one. Unfortunately, the only showing wasn’t until ten o’ clock that night and it was only seven. We all agreed it was time to get something to eat, then we could hit the arcades while we were waiting for the film. I’d make some excuse up for being home so late to tell my parents. It was hard enough to persuade them to let me walk home. There was a good chance they’d ground me for being out past midnight, especially as we had our first day of school the next day, but I was willing to risk that.

We ate in one of the restaurants, after waiting what seemed an eternity for the food to come. I wolfed down a steak and chips, then settled back while the others finished eating, my hunger finally satisfied.

In the arcades after our meal, I battled it out against David, the only real male best mate I had, on some fighting game. I had known him since primary school, and we had

spent many afternoons locked in battle on the latest console games, both evenly matched. That day I was winning.

He swore furiously as I knocked his character to the ground and proceeded to beat him to a pulp while he was down, smashing the buttons in a desperate attempt to get back up and give as good as he was getting. A bead of sweat rolled down from under his light brown hair, which he wiped away before it could trickle into his blue eyes. His hair was trimmed short but not shaved as short as I kept mine back then. He was of a similar build to me and in a real fight we would probably have been fairly evenly matched too, though I think he was maybe a little stronger than me, while I was definitely the faster. He was probably fitter as well due to his love of football, something I'd never really got into. I did have a kick about with him from time to time but I had no real passion for any sports.

On the machine next to us, Fiona and Lizzy were on the dance mat. Lizzy would have been equally as happy on the fighting game with me, or shooting down enemies of some description, or racing, but Fiona's favourite was the dance mat. She wasn't really a gamer like the rest of us. Her long brown hair was bouncing up and down as she switched from arrow to arrow almost effortlessly, her brown eyes full of joy from behind her glasses as the game awarded her A grade after A grade, regardless of the song. She was another girl gifted with good looks. I know you must be thinking how lucky my teenage self was to be surrounded by so many hot girls, but they really were all growing up to be beautiful young women.

Of the girls in the group, she was definitely the fittest, partly because she did gymnastics and dance. She had a nicely toned body and though she was white, she had quite dark skin as if she had a permanent tan. David had a major crush on her but unfortunately for him the feeling wasn't mutual. She loved him as a friend but her heart was currently owned by a guy who'd been in the year above us before he left school that summer, and she had eyes for no one else.

Fiona scored highest on most of the dances they did but Lizzy just managed to beat her on the odd song, with more exclamations of "Yay me!" each time. It had been her saying for as long as I'd known her. Fiona was a good sport, congratulating her for each victory without coming across as patronising.

The last two of our group, Ava and Becci, were shooting down zombies.

Ava was the scientist among us. She had always been a strange kid but then she came from a strange family. It was rumoured her mum slept in a coffin, though how true that was I didn't know. Both she and her mum were goths but they were also vegetarians, so I doubted they took the vampire thing too seriously. She had shoulder length hair dyed a dark red that summer but the colour often changed, as much as school would allow. However, unlike a lot of goths I knew, she wasn't particularly pale. She was a little chubby but not so overweight I would describe her as being fat and, though she wasn't stunningly beautiful, she certainly wasn't ugly.

Becci I always thought of as slightly insane, but then, so was I which meant we got on well. She was also obsessed with sex. Once she told us she'd had sex with her boyfriend in front of the webcam while both of them were pretending to be boys, just to turn on a gay guy she'd met in a chat room. And I believed it. It was the sort of thing she'd do. One of the craziest things I ever saw her do was during a PE lesson when the girls were playing rounders, while we boys played cricket. Ava was her best friend, but they had been put into different teams so Becci had crawled down the banking army style, stopping whenever the PE teacher looked her way, frozen there until she looked away again.

That might have been effective if she was camouflaged, but the PE uniform for both boys and girls was a maroon rugby shirt and blue shorts. And yet somehow she

managed to crawl down the banking without being seen, even though logic should dictate it was a doomed mission from the start.

Once on the field where Ava's team were playing, she crept over to where her friend stood. The teacher caught her halfway there, and I couldn't hear what was said since we were on the furthest field from the school building, but Lizzy had filled me in. The teacher had asked Becci what she was doing out there, and stupidly Becci pointed to the banking where she had come from and said "I'm supposed to be up there Miss."

Our game of cricket had been all but forgotten whilst we watched that particular crazy episode.

Like Ava, Becci was also something of a goth, though she was much slimmer than her best mate and she wasn't a vegetarian. It wouldn't surprise me if she did try vampirism but she hadn't as far as I knew. She certainly had the pale skin for it.

She too had a habit of dyeing her shoulder length hair on a regular basis but she'd kept it black for some time that year, and she also had quite a plain face.

The arcade kept us busy until it was time for the film. We bought tickets and popcorn before going in, heading straight for the back row. I ended up between Lizzy and Fiona. David had made sure he was sat on the other side of Fiona so he could comfort her, not that she needed it. I felt a bit sorry for him. I'd never seen him that way with a girl before and it seemed like some cruel twist of fate that the one girl he had really fallen for was already in love with someone else. That was exactly why I'd never had an interest in relationships as a teenager, feeling sex was all I wanted.

We threw popcorn at each other, laughing and talking about school, what we'd done during the holidays, and in Becci's case, sex, sex and more sex. When the film started a bald man in front turned round and glared at us. We grew quiet after that, mainly because of the muscles rippling beneath his shirt. Apart from him, the cinema was all but deserted.

The film itself was great. It was well written with a decent plot, and what my younger self would have described as awesome visual effects. But what really made it for me were the werewolves. They were half men, half wolf creatures, resembling everything I thought a werewolf should be and more, not like the kind of werewolves that barely changed, which I always said looked more like wereapes. Any werewolves that were little more than hairy men with a slightly bestial face were a disappointment, and if they didn't meet my expectations it often ruined what would otherwise have been a good werewolf movie for me. But that movie had everything I wanted to see, including some great blood and gore effects. It was one of those rare horror films that I found so good it filled me with an excitement, almost sexual in its intensity. I felt so alive in the cinema that night.

The others were enjoying the film on some lesser, more normal level. Had we known what was soon to come, we may have been screaming like the characters in the film, but even if a psychic had told us our future, we wouldn't have believed it. My life as a care-free, mostly average teenager was about to come to a brutal end. How I long to go back and change the path fate was about to set me on, but of course these are only memories, and no matter how completely I might lose myself in the telling of them to you, I am powerless to change my own past.

We emerged from the cinema to find the world in shadow, the sun having long since set as we whiled away the hours in Leisure X. It was a mild, dark night and a full moon hung overhead like a dead eye, the only light save for a few street lamps. I remember it well. There was a cool breeze, so I put on my jacket as I stared up at the night sky. That feeling the film had filled me with intensified and I felt more alive than ever, gazing up at the glowing white orb. Clouds suspended it like the muscles of some

great face as it held me transfixed in its blind, milky gaze. I was dimly aware of one of the others talking but I was so caught in the moon's spell that I wasn't following the conversation, until one of them placed a hand on my shoulder.

"What?" I asked distractedly. The clouds began to drift across the moon until it was hidden behind a wispy eyelid, throwing the world further into darkness and breaking the spell. The moon had never affected me so before. I'd always felt drawn to it, but never to that extent. I put it down to the after effects of the film, and the time of night itself. I always felt more awake in the late hours of the night, regardless of what phase the moon had reached in its cycle.

"Hey, are you okay man?" David asked.

My friends were looking at me worriedly.

"Yeah I'm fine, just thinking I guess," I shrugged. "So a full moon, huh? Scary after seeing the film, don't you think? Coincidence or what? That werewolf could be waiting for us just round the corner. If we're lucky it'll kill us before it rips us apart, or if we're even luckier it might turn us!"

"Give it a rest Nick," Ava replied, ever the scientist. "Werewolves exist only in film. The only thing we have to fear is lunatics who think they are wolves, and as you used to do taekwondo there isn't much harm they could do."

Despite the strangeness surrounding her family, she was in the top class for nearly every subject and she did have a real passion for science. As we neared adulthood and were encouraged to think on what career paths we wanted to follow, she had decided she wanted to be an astronomer – space had always fascinated her.

"Why would anyone want that?" Fiona asked with a shudder. "Why would you want to turn into a man eating monster?"

Why? Good question. I never really knew why. It was the actual ability to gain the more powerful wolf form I wanted, to become a wolf or at least a wolf man creature, not the death that always came with it in the films. With that power I could deal with the bullies that had taunted me for so long for a start. But why a werewolf specifically, and not some other supernatural creature, or a comic book hero like most guys, I had no idea. To Fiona, I just shrugged. "We all have our dreams."

"Come on, before he starts howling," David said.

"I feel like howling right now. Weren't the werewolves great? Not like all these crap hairy men with fangs that some directors are so fond of," I commented enthusiastically as we set off back into town. "I mean, they could make them more wolf-like! The ones in this film were perfect."

"Nick, werewolves are a myth or a legend, call them what you will, but the fact is, they aren't real and so no one knows what they look like. You could be called a werewolf," argued Ava.

"I wish," I muttered. "Legend has it that they are humans who turn into wolves, so in the films they should use real wolves! Or at least make them look wolfish, like we just saw."

"It is hard to get real wolves to act like humans though," Lizzy commented.

"Ah, but that's the point. Legend also has it that their minds become wolfish as well as their bodies so they act like wolves! All they've gotta do is film a wolf hunting but use a computer or something to make it look like they're hunting humans," I argued back. "That's why in many werewolf stories, the werewolf wakes up the next day with no memory of what happened the previous night, because they weren't in control."

"Whatever," said Ava, unconvinced.

The conversation turned once again to Becci's favourite subject, namely: sex.

Somehow the subject of whether I was a virgin or not came up. Becci didn't believe I'd done it.

“You’ve never even had a girlfriend!” she said, her shoulder length black hair falling in curtains around her pale face.

“So? That doesn’t make me a virgin,” I replied.

“Yeah Becci, you should know him well enough by now. He doesn’t do relationships! Heartless, aren’t you mate? You wouldn’t know love if it punched you in the face,” David said.

“Aye,” I agreed with a grin, taking it as a compliment. I dreamt of being famous one day, for what I didn’t know, but it would be something to do with horror, so that’s how I wanted the public to see me: heartless and sick, with a twisted sense of humour. I didn’t know what I’d be famous for, but I already had ideas about my image. Sometimes, if I was feeling really bigheaded, I would fantasise I could change the world, though for better or worse I didn’t know. “It’s true, I never felt nothing for no one, not in that way. Besides, why bother with a relationship? Do or say whatever it takes to get ’em into bed and move onto the next one.”

The others laughed, though Fiona and Lizzy, and possibly David too in light of his feelings for Fiona, didn’t agree with me.

As we walked, I kept darting behind the girls trying to make them jump. It didn’t work but I tried anyway until Lizzy said “Will you quit fooling?”

I stuck my tongue out playfully and laughed. Then I looked ahead at the road we were walking down and wondered if the myths about werewolves were really true. After watching the film, I wanted more than ever to believe they were and that I would someday be one, young fool that I was.

The eerie feeling that someone or something was behind us cut through my thoughts. I froze and turned around. There was nothing there. I turned back to my friends who had stopped and were looking at me questioningly. I told them to look around. Nothing. Not surprisingly, they thought I was making it up and rolled their eyes. They carried on walking. I followed, uneasily.

Suddenly, a man appeared at the side of the road, out of nowhere. The cloudy eyelids above parted to reveal a slither of the pale orb they’d shut out. A beam of moonlight fell on the stranger, revealing a little more of his dark form. He had black hair and he was wearing a leather jacket, black t-shirt and blue jeans. He had his head down and he was groaning in agony. He ran past us and Fiona asked "Hey, shouldn't we see if we can help?"

I shook my head.

"Some things are best left alone," I said simply, trusting my instincts on that one, and the others agreed. Fiona shrugged and after that we thought nothing of it, thinking he probably had really bad stomach ache or something, and so we carried on walking.

Just minutes later, after crossing the road and rounding the corner onto a new street, we came to a standstill again, this time because there was something waiting in the darkness at the end of the road, stood just out of the light of the street lamps. We couldn’t make out what it was as it was stood in shadow, but we could see its two eyes and it was almost as if we’d frozen in place from their icy glare. They were cold and merciless, the eyes of a killer, a predator, though not necessarily evil. They told enough about the creature to know that we were in trouble. I gaped at them. They told me something else about the creature, something my friends wouldn’t know. But the only thought running through my brain after learning this information was that it couldn’t be. Not here. Not in England. And yet it was.

The night’s great eye had completely opened once more and the street was bathed in moonlight, making the creature’s eyes glow menacingly. Now surrounded by

moonlight rather than shadow, it revealed the identity of the beast, the identity which I had already guessed at from the colour and shape of its eyes.

A wolf stood there at the end of the road, blocking our path. From its size I guessed it was a grey wolf, or a timber wolf if you'd prefer. *Canis Lupis*. This particular specimen was black rather than grey and it was quite large for its species, though not unnaturally so. I assumed it was male since it was so big and muscular.

"Erm Nick, what do we do?" Fiona asked me nervously. I stared blankly at her for a moment, my brain still reeling at the wolf's very presence. I had known they were wolf's eyes because of all the books I had read on wolves and all the pictures I'd seen. I had seen many wolves in the zoo but knew none were left in the wild in Britain, the last one having been shot some centuries ago. Which was why I was so shocked to find myself face to face with one in the town centre, of all places. Of course they were looking to me for what to do, since I was supposed to be the expert on wolves. I recovered enough from the initial shock to weigh up our options.

"Come on mate, do we run or what?" David asked.

"No!" I replied, snapping out of it. "No, if we run he's only gonna give chase. Erm, maybe back away slowly."

"Maybe?" David snorted. "That's the best you've got?"

I glared at him and he fell silent. We began backing away as I had suggested, keeping our eyes fixed on the wolf, waiting to see what he would do.

At first I thought it was working as the wolf never moved, but just as we were about to turn back round the corner he charged us.

"Oh shit, run!" I yelled.

The others didn't need telling twice. We broke into a sprint, desperate to escape the predator that had decided we were prey. And yet no ordinary wolf would attack a human. I had to assume he was either rabid or weakened in some way that meant he couldn't hunt his natural prey. Weakened enough that he had been forced to turn to a much slower animal, one that made for an easier kill. I hoped for the latter explanation. If he was rabid one bite would kill us, not to mention he would easily run us down. If he had been weakened we might stand a chance of escaping.

As the fastest of the group, I easily pulled ahead of my mates, pushing my body to its limits. Ava was the slowest but it was Becci who was stupid enough to turn round, wanting to know if the wolf was closing in. She didn't see the lamp post until it was too late and she crashed into it, winded as she slid to the ground.

Realising what had happened, I swore loudly and turned back the way we'd come. I had no idea what I was going to do when I got to her but I had to do something. I couldn't just leave her there for the wolf to feed on. Wordlessly, Lizzy came with me. The others never even slowed down.

I ran as fast as I could but I knew I was never going to make it back to her in time. The wolf was just too fast, he would be on her in minutes. Becci had been dazed from the collision with the lamp post but she had recovered enough to realise what was happening. She watched as the wolf drew level with her, screaming in terror. Yet the wolf kept on going. He was coming for me!

"Bollocks!" I screamed; a really heartfelt curse. I might have been willing to risk my life crossing the road, thinking I didn't fear death. But when it came right down to it I was terrified. In that instant I didn't want to die, not yet.

As soon as the wolf was past her, Becci managed to pull herself up and run in the opposite direction, leaving me to my fate. But Lizzy wouldn't leave me.

She desperately cast around for something to defend ourselves with. There wasn't much on the ground, just a few small stones. She grabbed one and threw it at the wolf as

hard as she could. The beast barely even flinched and he never once wavered from his chosen target. And then he was upon me.

I threw out an arm to protect myself, for all the good it would do. The wolf grabbed hold but his teeth didn't sink as deep as I expected. It was almost like he was being careful with me. His fangs ripped through the sleeve of my jacket but they barely raked the skin underneath, leaving only a slight scratch. I fought free of the jacket and let him have it, hoping it'd distract him long enough for me to escape. It hung limply in his jaws like the carcass of some small animal, until he dropped it and advanced forward again.

The beast leapt on me, knocking me to the concrete and sending pain flooding through my body. Something in my chest throbbed. I brought my arms up again in an attempt to keep his jaws away from my throat, or I knew it would all be over. My hands tried to grasp hold of something. His fangs sliced through the now exposed flesh which stung with the pain, and blood ran down, quickly weakening me. I strained against him with everything I had but it wasn't enough. His jaws were drawing closer and closer to my throat until his fangs pierced my flesh, even with my hands being sort of in the way. I let go and tried hitting him for all the good it did. He didn't even seem to feel it.

"Run Lizzy, there's nothing you can do!" I managed to shout through the pain and the terror. I guess it's true what they say, you find out who your real friends are in these situations. She was the only one who'd stayed to try and save me. But it was too late then; there was nothing she could do. There was no sense for both of us to die.

When I first felt the wolf's fangs slide in I thought I would die. The fear was soon gone and only the pain remained. No matter what awaited me on my final journey, be it some form of afterlife, reincarnation or oblivion, I was no longer afraid. I closed my eyes and waited for death to come. But death did not come. The pain intensified but I felt the fangs slide out again as the wolf rose off of me with a yelp.

Lizzy, God bless her, had not run after all. She had given the street a proper search for something, anything, that she could use as a weapon. And she'd found half a beer bottle.

The wolf twisted round, trying to get at the wound in his shoulder where she'd plunged the glass deep inside until it had hit the bone and could go no further. He couldn't reach it and turned back to us, growling angrily. With a slight limp he charged again, this time at Lizzy, but something spooked him and he veered off course, now unmistakably fleeing. We didn't know what had scared him but we weren't going to stick around and find out.

Lizzy helped me to my feet but I couldn't stand unsupported at first so she let me lean on her. I felt bruised and battered from being knocked to the ground, and the blood loss was making me dizzy. My chest felt like it was on fire and I wondered if the wolf had managed to crack a rib.

"Come on Nick, we have to get you to a hospital," she said, helping me walk.

"No hospitals," I gasped through the pain.

"Nick, you're covered in blood! You need a hospital," she told me. "Those wounds might need stitching."

"Not my blood," I lied. "Most of it's wolf after you stabbed him."

"Come on or you're going to die and I'll lose my bet," she joked. "I never thought it'd be death by wolf."

I started to laugh but it hurt too much. "Just get me home."

"I still think you need to get those wounds checked out."

"No hospitals!" I snarled through the pain. "Please."

I could tell she wanted to argue but my house was nearer than the hospital and we currently had no signal on our phones to call an ambulance, though she checked several

times. She didn't want to leave me there in case there were any other wolves on the loose, so she had no choice. She probably planned to come in with me and ring an ambulance as soon as we got through the door but I was adamant I wasn't going. It was stupid and childish, but I knew a hospital would lead to too many awkward questions, and my parents would probably never let me leave the house again if they knew there was a predator out on the streets. How I would hide the extent of my injuries I had no idea, but I thought I could hide more of the night's events from my parents than I could from the hospital staff.

"I suppose you're going to tell me we can't go to the police either?" she asked after a few minutes.

"That's right," I answered.

"They need to know there's a dangerous wild animal on the loose," she said.

"Well leave an anonymous tip if you must but with that wound you dealt him, I don't think he's gonna survive for long," I told her. "Unless a vet were to remove that glass it's not coming out and more than likely it'll get infected, trust me."

After a while the pain became bearable and as strange as it seemed a little of my strength was returning. I told Lizzy I could manage to walk the rest of the way unaided. That seemed to satisfy her that I didn't need a hospital after all.

We reached the point where we would need to part ways if Lizzy was going to go straight home. She still wanted to make sure I got home safe but I was insistent I'd be fine and she should take care of herself. I was only five minutes from my house so she let me go, but I knew she didn't really want to. Before she went I asked her to make sure the others didn't tell anyone about the wolf attack.

"Those four ought to be too ashamed of themselves to talk to anyone about what happened," she said, but assured me she would as she turned away towards her house.

I walked up past the school, trying not to think about the fact that I'd be trapped within its walls just hours later. Then I passed the playing field on the opposite side of the road, not much further down the street, where dog owners frequented with their furry friends, and football matches often took place. The field was bordered by hedges and on the side nearest my house there were trees and some other kind of vegetation all kept safe behind a spiky metal fence.

It was somewhere within that vegetation those same predatory eyes we'd encountered just a half hour ago were watching me. When I first saw them I think my heart stopped. Despite what I'd told Lizzy about the wolf's wounds, he'd come back to finish me off. And though I'd regained enough strength to walk unsupported I was far from strong enough to run. I was doomed and I knew it.

I struggled down to a kneeling position and prayed I would find something to defend myself with as Lizzy had done. But the only things cast aside on the pavement that time were empty crisp packets and chocolate bar wrappers, nothing of any help whatsoever. As I searched the wolf leapt for me a second time, but there was another yelp similar to when Lizzy first wounded him. A dark fluid which could only be blood was running down the fence. Lucky for me he must have impaled himself on the spikes. Maybe because of the wound he'd not been able to clear the fence properly.

I stood and looked around at the wolf I expected to see, but it was not a wolf's limp form on the metal railing the animal had launched himself over and had indeed impaled himself on – it was a man's! The man hung limp over the fence, silhouetted against the moonlight, blood gushing from his wounds, staining the railing red. The perilously sharp spikes had pierced his chest about where his heart would be. I looked closer and realised it was the man who'd passed us earlier that night, although he was naked now. Was I becoming delirious with blood loss? I decided it was time I got myself home quick before I grew too weak again and the night got any weirder. With a slight

shiver at the sight of him I finally staggered away, puzzled at what had happened, because after all, as much as I wanted to believe werewolves were real, I knew they were not. Though I was sure it had been the wolf lying in wait for me on the other side of that fence, not a man, and yet there he was... I was unable to think properly, feeling dizzy again from the blood I was still losing through the wounds which seemed to be very deep.

Somehow I managed to stagger the rest of the way home. I was in agony again as I walked, mostly from the pain in my neck which was far worse than anything I'd ever experienced before, and soon the mystery was forgotten. I let myself in and struggled up the ladder onto my bunk bed, muttering into the darkness before sleep took me and grinning to myself at the thought of it.

"I guess I did reach the Devil after all."