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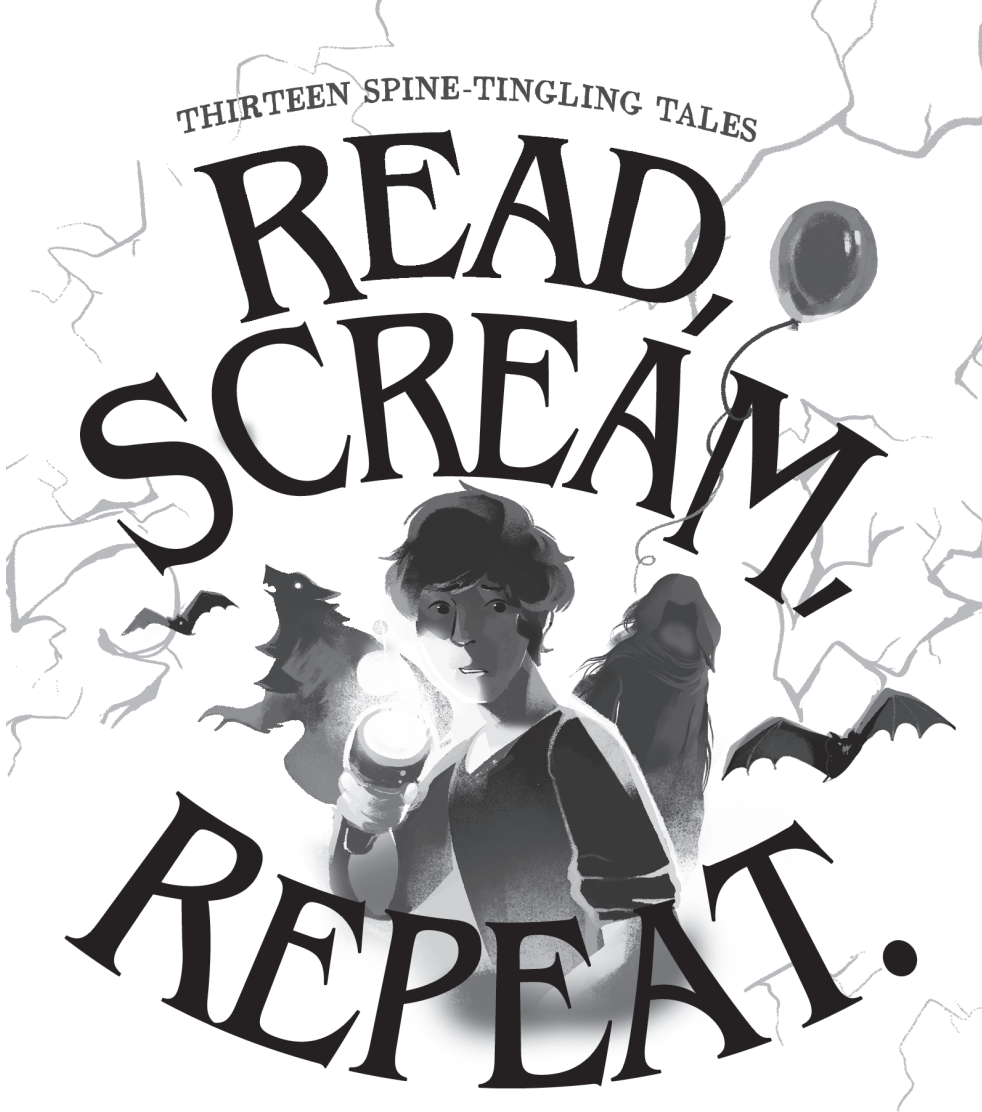
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THIRTEEN SPINE-TINGLING TALES

# READ, SCREAM, REPEAT.



CURATED BY

## JENNIFER KILLICK



# WOLF MOON

*By Kirsty Applebaum*

‘Don’t talk to any strangers!’

‘Course I won’t.’ Toby shivered while Mum squeezed him goodbye. ‘Stop fussing, I’ll be OK.’ Thank goodness she wouldn’t be able to follow him on to the railway platform. She really was worrying way too much. Literally all he had to do was sit on the train until the very last stop and Gran would be waiting for him at the other end.

It was bitingly cold. Toby managed to put his ticket in the slot without taking his gloves off.

‘Stay focused on getting to Gran’s,’ Mum called after him. ‘Don’t let that overactive imagination of yours run away with itself.’

Could she be any more embarrassing? Toby glanced around the platform to see if anyone had

heard, but there were only about six people there and none of them seemed interested in him. They were rubbing their gloved hands and breathing steamy breath into the frosty air.

'If you sit by the window I might be able to give you a final wave,' shouted Mum.

Toby looked up at the sky. There'd be a full moon later. A *wolf moon* – that's what they called it in January, because someplace, somewhere, there were more wolves howling around the time of the January full moon. You didn't get too many wolves howling around here, though, no matter what time of year it was.

A deep rumbling started up from the track. Toby covered his ears as the train screamed into the station.



Toby stood in the aisle between the seats. Where should he sit? There were only two other people in his carriage: a lady in a denim jacket sitting in a window seat to the right, and a man a bit further back, out of sight except for the top of his head, which was bald and tattooed.

Oh – Mum had wanted to wave him off, hadn't



she? She'd been really annoying at the station, but now that he was on the train Toby had a horrible feeling he was missing her a little bit already. I mean, here he was, in a tiny space with two complete strangers – and they were all about to zoom off into the middle of absolutely nowhere. They could be murderers for all he knew. Or kidnappers. Or master criminals. Or government assassins. Or –

*Stay focused on getting to Gran's*, Toby reminded himself.

He sat down next to the window on the left and tucked his rucksack between his knees. Sure enough, there was Mum, waving at him from behind the ticket gates. He gave her a thumbs up.

She got smaller and smaller as the train pulled away.



Toby stretched out his legs. His seat had extra foot space because it was one of those ones where the seats opposite face in towards you. The opposite seats were empty – well, almost empty. There was a bag on the one straight in front of him. It was oblong, like a small suitcase, and it had a flowery

pattern all over it. Toby wondered if it belonged to denim-jacket lady.

He unwound his scarf and pushed it into the top of his rucksack. His mind wandered to tonight's full moon. He thought about werewolves. What would it be like, to transform for one night every month? To have thick hair sprout up all over your body? To feel blade-sharp teeth pushing through your gums? He pictured himself on the prowl through lamplit streets, searching for prey.

'Does that belong to you, kid?'

Toby jerked out of his daydream. 'Pardon?' he said.

'Does that belong to you?' It was denim-jacket lady. She was pointing at the flowery bag.

*As if*, thought Toby. He felt like saying he'd drop down dead of embarrassment if his mum made him carry a bag like that, but he'd promised he wouldn't talk to strangers so he just shook his head instead.

'Mmmm.' Denim-jacket lady frowned. There was a sticker on her top pocket. It said: *I give blood*. She turned to tattoo man. 'Excuse me?'

Tattoo man looked up. 'What?'

'There's some unaccompanied luggage here.'



She pointed at the bag again. 'Is it yours?'

Tattoo man stood up. He was right behind the seat with the bag on it. He reached his arm over and –

'Don't touch it!' said Toby. 'It might be a bomb!' Immediately, he realized he'd both spoken to a stranger *and* let his overactive imagination run away with itself. Double whammy. He squeezed his lips tight shut.

'Kid's right,' said denim-jacket lady. 'Maybe don't touch it.'

'It's certainly not mine, anyway,' said tattoo man.

'In that case, I'm going to find the guard.' Denim-jacket lady stood up. 'What is it they say these days? *See it, say it, sort it?*'

'Isn't it *See it, say it, sort-ED*?' said Toby. Oh no – he'd done it again! *Be quiet*, he told himself.

Denim-jacket lady gave another frown. 'Either way I think it works.' She disappeared through to the next carriage.

Toby stared at the bag. *Was* it a bomb? Almost certainly, he reckoned. If he unzipped it, he'd probably see a mass of coloured wires and some blocks of explosive, all fixed to a ticking timer with

half an hour left on it. And half an hour would totally not be long enough for the bomb disposal team to reach them, so Toby would have to try to deactivate it himself, following instructions from army experts over speakerphone. But, at the crucial moment, the train would go through a tunnel and connection would be lost and Toby would have to make his best guess because there'd only be seconds left now and of course he'd guess red because that's his favourite colour and the bomb would stop ticking and Toby would have single-handedly saved everyone on the train and –

The carriage door slid open. It was denim-jacket lady. 'Not a guard to be seen.' She rolled her eyes. 'Budget cuts.'

She stood in the aisle, stuck her hands on her hips and looked at the flowery bag. 'We should get rid of it,' she said. 'Chuck it off.'

Toby stared at her. So did tattoo man.

'Chuck it off?' said tattoo man. 'You mean throw it off the train?'

'Yep. There's a good thirty-five minutes until the next stop and that bag is making me very nervous. We should just shove it through the window and be done with it.'



Toby had to admit it was making him nervous too. Maybe he'd text Mum and ask what she thought they should do. She was good at this kind of thing. He delved into his rucksack for his phone.

'But –' denim-jacket lady squinted at the top of the window – 'only that narrow part opens up, so I'm not sure it'll fit through.'

Toby found his phone. Completely dead. He'd forgotten to charge it.

Tattoo man leaned over the seat and checked out the flowery bag. His tattoos weren't only on his head. He had a curly-lettered word inked on to the back of each hand. They were sort of sideways and upside down to Toby, but he could still read them.

*ANGEL* and *DEMON*.

'It'll fit.' Tattoo man patted the window with his DEMON hand. 'I used to work on the railways. Seventeen years. There's a trick to getting these open wider than you think. But . . . I dunno. What if it's full of someone's most treasured possessions? Maybe we should take a look inside it first.'

'And risk getting blown up?' said denim-jacket lady. 'Better to just get rid of it. The longer it sits there, the more likely it is to explode.'

Toby shifted in his seat. Of all the places he

could have picked to sit in, he'd chosen the getting-blown-up place. He was starting to feel very hot and sweaty.

'You sure it doesn't belong to the boy?' said tattoo man. 'Come on, nipper –' he winked at Toby – 'own up – the bag's yours, isn't it?'

That disgusting flowery bag? Toby glanced at denim-jacket lady. She was staring at him too! They both thought it was his!

'It's not mine,' he blurted out. 'It's horrible! I'd never carry a bag like that!'

Tattoo man lifted his eyebrows.

'That's it, then,' said denim-jacket lady. 'We chuck it off. I'm not waiting any longer.'



Tattoo man pulled open the window and an icy *whoosh* swept into the carriage. The rhythmic clatter of the speeding train roared around them. Toby felt horribly close to the cold metal tracks and the tree branches clawing at the windows.

Tattoo man fiddled with the hinges and managed to open the window a bit wider.

'Right, then,' said denim-jacket lady. 'Easy does it.' Slowly, carefully, as if it was made of the most



delicate glass, she lifted the bag up and rested it on the rim of the window.

'Stop!' Tattoo man put his ANGEL hand on top of the bag. 'I've got a bad feeling about this. I'm having second thoughts. I don't think we should do it.'

Toby held his breath. If the bag exploded, they'd be blown to smithereens.

'Look,' said denim-jacket lady. 'There's no guard and it's almost thirty minutes before we reach the next stop. If it doesn't have a bomb in it and we chuck it out, what's the worst that could happen? Someone has to go and buy a new pair of pyjamas? But if it *does* have a bomb in it and we *don't* chuck it out, it's goodbye and goodnight to all of us. We won't be worried about unaccompanied luggage after that; we'll all be riding that big train in the sky.'

She pushed at the bag but tattoo man held it firm.

Toby's chest tightened. The likelihood that he'd really be able to diffuse an actual real-life bomb, he realized, was pretty low. Even with instructions from army experts over speakerphone.

'We need to think about this a bit longer,' said tattoo man.

‘We do not need to think about it!’ said denim-jacket lady. ‘We need to save this train and save ourselves! It’s down to us!’

Branches knocked against the window and cold air swept around the carriage. The train kept up its steady pulse on the tracks: *chank-chank-chank-chank-chank*.

‘It’s down to us to make a carefully considered decision,’ said tattoo man.

Toby’s heart seemed to have clambered up his windpipe and decided to hang out at the back of his mouth. His whole throat was beating. The bag *must* have a bomb inside, mustn’t it? Why else would someone leave it on its own?

‘If this explodes before I manage to get rid of it, it’s on you,’ replied denim-jacket lady. She tried to push the bag again, but the ANGEL hand held it still.

Toby thought about all those wires and explosives. He thought about the timer on its unstoppable countdown. The train drummed in his ears, sounding just like a clock. *Chank-chank-chank-chank-chank-chank-chank*. *Tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick*.

Denim-jacket lady was right. They were running out of time.



Wires.

Explosives.

Smithereens.

Goodbye and goodnight.

*Chank-chank-chank-chank-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick tick-tick-tick-tick-tick –*

Toby leaped up from his seat.

He gave the flowery bag a huge, two-handed *shove . . .* and it was gone.

‘What on earth?’ Tattoo man looked around, stunned.

‘Good call, kid,’ said denim-jacket lady.

Tattoo man sighed. He closed the window and the carriage went quiet again.

Toby sat back down and tucked his hands under his thighs. The seat material felt weird – both smooth and prickly all at once.

He tried to plan what he’d do with Gran this evening.

He tried to think about who he’d put in the Arsenal line-up for next week’s match.

He tried to remember the names of all twelve full moons.

But the only thing he could think about was the flowery bag.

The carriage was suffocatingly, overwhelmingly, mind-bendingly full of the bag's *not-there-ness.*

Not long afterwards, an old lady entered the carriage. She walked unsteadily down the aisle.

She was, thought Toby, exactly the sort of old lady who might own a flowery bag.

*

'Where's my case?' said the old lady. 'My floral case. It was right there.' She pointed at the empty seat opposite Toby.

'You must have the wrong carriage,' said denim-jacket lady.

'No.' The old lady shook her head. 'Somebody's moved it.'

Toby stared intently at the floor under the opposite seats. There was a muddy train ticket and an opened cola can that had somehow managed to remain upright all this time.

The old lady shuffled around, peering between the rows.

Right now, Toby wanted to be anywhere else in the world except here. He wanted to turn back time so he could catch an earlier train or refuse to go to Gran's or something – *anything* so that he hadn't been here in this carriage, pushing that bag



out of the window.

'I have to find it.' The old lady's voice was beginning to shake. 'That case contains something very precious to me.' The train jolted. The old lady grabbed at a seat to stay upright. The cola can fell over and rolled across the floor.

'Perhaps you should sit down,' said Toby.

'Yes,' said the old lady, fixing Toby in the eye. 'Perhaps. I. Should.' She said the words very slowly and very clearly, as if each one had a full stop after it. Like she really wanted Toby to think about them.

She made her way over and sat down facing him, in the very seat where she'd left her bag.

She pulled a crumpled tissue out of her pocket. 'I'll never be able to replace it,' she said. 'I have to find that case.'

'If your bag had something that important in it,' said denim-jacket lady, 'why did you leave it unattended?'

'I left it here to save my place while I was in the toilet.' The old lady blew her nose.

'You were in the toilet? All that time?' said tattoo man, looking between the headrests. 'We've been on this train for ages. What in heaven's name were you doing in there?'

‘Excuse me!’ Denim-jacket lady was turning out to be a world-class frowner. ‘It’s very rude to ask someone what they do in the toilet.’

Tattoo man sank back into his seat.

‘What’s the precious thing?’ asked Toby. He gave the cola can a nudge with the toe of his trainer. He hoped the precious thing might not really be that precious at all. Perhaps it was something you could just order off the Internet. If it was, he could maybe even replace it with his own money.

The old lady leaned towards Toby. ‘If you want, I can tell you the whole story. But it’s a terrifying tale. Once heard, it can never be unheard, not for as long as you live. Are you sure you want to hear it?’

Toby nodded.

‘All right,’ she said. ‘Then come a little closer.’

Toby shuffled to the edge of his seat.

Denim-jacket lady scooted one place nearer.

Even tattoo man came round and sat close by to hear the tale.



‘A long time ago, when I was a beautiful young maiden, we had a summer so hot the ground baked your shoes as you walked, and the sun



breathed fire from rise to set. I took to going out only after dark, when the air had cooled and moonlight spilled on to the treetops. One particular night, there was a glorious full moon. It illuminated the land with a haunting glow. I headed into the forest and went further than I’d ever been before.

‘The place was full of life. Foxes darted between trees, and ghostly owls flew overhead on silent wings. Eventually I came across a lake, shimmering in the darkness, and on its banks was a woman. She appeared to be a good deal older than I was, although I couldn’t be sure, for she wore a dark cloak with a hood pulled well up over her head.’

Toby gave an involuntary shiver.

The old lady continued. ‘She was taking ten paces one way, then ten paces back, over and over, all the while pressing her hands to her cheeks and shaking her head. I didn’t like to see a lone soul so anxious, so I asked her what was wrong. She told me the most frightening story I had ever heard. It chilled me to the bone, though the night was warm, and as she spoke I swear I saw a flash of amber eyes under the folds of her hood.

‘She told me that when she was much younger,

she had been cursed to transform into a horrifying beast at every full moon – half wolf, half woman – an atrocious creature, devoid of humanity, who would attack her own grandmother given the chance.'

Toby thought of his own gran, leaving her little cottage any time now, to meet him at the station.

'However,' the old lady went on, 'the hooded woman explained she was also in possession of an amulet – an enchanted charm as round and as silver as the full moon itself – which protected her from the curse. As long as she kept it close to her at all times, she would remain entirely human, even during a full moon. So she wore it, always, on a chain around her neck. But that evening she had taken a swim in the lake, and she'd lost the amulet! *I've been searching for hours*, she told me. *I'm close enough to the amulet for its magic to work, but if I stray from the lake it will no longer protect me and each full moon will see me transform into a wolf-woman. Who knows what damage I could cause! I shall have to stay by this lake forever! What will become of me? Oh, please help me find the amulet!*

'Well, I couldn't abandon the poor soul,' said the old lady, 'so I assured her I would help. She



grabbed my hand with strong, bony fingers. *You are so kind*, she said. I began to ask her in which part of the lake she'd been swimming, but then, in one quick movement, she pulled my hand to her mouth and sank her teeth into my fingers.'

Toby gasped.

'I was too shocked even to scream,' said the old lady. 'I pulled away and stumbled backwards. The woman took her hood down and laughed.

'*Why did you do that?* I asked her. *I was going to help you.*

'*I don't need your help any longer*, she cackled. *I've finally rid myself of the curse, after all these years. It's your curse now! You will become a wolf-monster at every full moon, instead of me! Unless of course you stay close to the amulet. But know this – it will only work if you keep it with you at all times!* Then she ran into the forest and I was left with a bleeding hand and a whole lake to search.'

The train began to slow and the old lady paused in her tale.

'What a load of old cobblers,' snorted denim-jacket lady. 'Oh, this is my stop.' She gathered up her things.

‘It’s my stop too,’ said tattoo man. He looked at Toby. ‘You do know this is all nonsense, don’t you, nipper? You going to be all right?’

Toby nodded. ‘I’m fine, thanks.’ He was keen to hear the rest of the story and had stopped worrying about the flowery bag.

The train drew to a halt and the open doors brought a shudder of January air. Tattoo man and denim-jacket lady got off. Nobody got on. When the train doors beeped shut again, Toby and the old lady were all alone in the carriage.

‘At first –’ the old lady leaned forward – ‘I thought it was all nonsense too. But remember – it was a full moon. Just like tonight. I tried walking away from the lake – away from this amulet the hooded woman had spoken of. But each time I reached a certain point I could feel the curse taking hold. It was racing through my bloodstream, seeping into my bones.’

‘What did you do?’ asked Toby, chin in hands, elbows on knees. The old lady had his full attention.

‘I searched the lake,’ she said. ‘I swam and swam. Day after day, night after night.’

‘Did you find it?’



‘Eventually. On the twenty-eighth day, just before the next full moon. Buried in the mud and the rot and the weeds. I hooked it over my neck and made my exhausted way back home. I’ve kept it on me ever since – until now.’

‘Until now?’ Toby felt a prickle on the back of his neck. His heart, which had returned to its usual spot in his chest, began inching back up into his throat.

‘The chain broke this morning,’ said the old lady. ‘Luckily, I caught the amulet before it fell. I put it in my bag – my floral case – for safe-keeping.’

The floral case.

The floral case that he, Toby, had shoved out of the window, miles and miles ago.

The train swung round a bend and the cola can rolled tinnily under the seats.

Toby tried to swallow but his mouth was completely dry.

He suddenly wished he’d got off the train with the others. Or asked them not to leave. Or just somehow fixed things so he’d never sat down in this carriage at all.

The old lady blinked. Was that a glint of wolf-like amber in her eyes?

‘If you know the whereabouts of my case,’ she said, ‘you must tell me. I have to find the amulet. We don’t have long.’ She looked out of the window. ‘The full moon is imminent.’

Toby looked out of the window too. It was true. The sky had grown dim. The wolf moon would be here very, very soon. And if the old lady was telling the truth about the moon, what else might she be telling the truth about?

What would happen if she transformed into a wolf-monster while they were still on the train? Would he be torn apart? Eaten alive? And what about the people in the other carriages?

This was all his fault.

He’d given the bag that final shove.

Toby gripped the edge of his prickly seat as the train sped further and further away from the amulet.

Was that the curve of a pale moon he could see, skimming the grey hills in the distance?



The old woman stared at Toby. She licked her lips. Her fingernails were thick and curled, like claws. Was she turning? Right now? Right here?



He shifted his gaze to the still-rolling cola can. They couldn’t be that far from the final stop now, surely. It felt like he’d been sitting here, opposite the old woman, forever. They *must* be nearly there. Gran was probably already at the station, waiting for him. Please let the train arrive soon. *Please*.

*Keep calm*, he told himself. *Wolf-people don’t really exist. Everything’s going to be fine*.

But the slice of moon above the horizon was growing bigger. Any moment now he could be sharing the carriage with a monster. If only he hadn’t pushed the bag out. If only he’d caught a different train. If only he’d –

The old lady whipped her arm across the table and grabbed his hand.

Toby froze.

‘Where’s my case?’ she said.

Toby couldn’t speak. He could hardly even breathe. The old lady’s strong bony fingers pressed hard.

‘Where’s. My. Case?’ she said. ‘You know where it is. I can see it in your eyes.’

‘I . . . um . . .’

‘Tell me!’

Toby’s voice had shrunk. ‘We . . . I mean . . . I . . .

um . . . we threw it out of the window.'

'I knew it!' The old lady's grip tightened even more.

'I'm sorry!' said Toby. 'We thought it was a bomb.' He tried to take a deep breath. Tried to stay calm. His mum's words echoed in the back of his mind: *don't let that overactive imagination of yours run away with itself*.

'I don't believe you'll turn into a wolf-person,' he said. 'Wolf-people don't exist. But it's still really, really bad that we threw your bag off the train and I'm really, really sor–'

The old lady yanked Toby's hand towards her. Then she bent forward – and bit it.

Toby pulled away. He couldn't scream. He couldn't shout. He couldn't think. He couldn't even feel the pain.

He grabbed his rucksack. Stumbled out of his seat.

*We are now approaching our final stop*, said an announcement.

Toby found his way to the carriage door.

He was going to be sick.

He was going to pass out.

He was going to –



*Please take all your personal belongings with you. We wish you a pleasant onward journey*.

Toby shoved his bitten hand into his pocket. He couldn't bear to look at it.

The old lady laughed.

'You . . . just . . . bit me.' Toby's voice barely came out at all. He tried again, louder. 'You just bit me!'

'Yes,' said the old lady, 'and now *you* have the curse! You'll become a wolf-boy every full moon – unless you can find the amulet, of course, and I imagine that's going to be a *very* challenging task.'

'There is no curse!' shouted Toby. 'It's cobblers. It's nonsense. Just like the others said!' But his hand throbbed in his pocket. Was it the curse, racing through his blood? Seeping into his bones?

The train doors beeped. Toby hit the button with his free hand and tore on to the platform. The light was fading. The top half of the huge wolf moon loomed above dark, shadowed hills. There was no time to find the amulet.

He felt the curse creeping up his arm, thudding towards his heart.

He fumbled in his pocket for his ticket and somehow managed to get through the gate.

There was Gran, beaming. So pleased to see him.

He veered to one side, bashing into another passenger.

'Oi! Watch out!'

He had to keep away from Gran. Think of the harm he might do to her, as a wild wolf-monster.

'Toby?' said Gran. 'What's wrong?' She moved in for a hug but Toby ducked away.

His mind galloped. The curse – it was all through his body. He could feel it from his toenails right up to the tips of his teeth. He could feel it in the skin of his scalp.

'Oh, Toby, what's the matt–' Gran stopped. She'd spotted something over his shoulder.

It was the old woman, coming through the gates.

'Old Erica,' said Gran, shaking her head. 'Was it her who upset you? Come on, let's get you to the car.'

Toby suddenly felt exhausted. He let Gran lead him out of the station. He caught a glimpse of himself reflected in a glass door. He didn't *look* like a wolf-boy. He just looked like Toby.

'Old Erica has a bit of a reputation around here,'



said Gran. 'She makes up unpleasant stories, just to scare people. And unfortunately, a lot of the time it works. She's very good at it.'

Unpleasant stories?

Just to scare people?

Toby would have given anything to know that this had all just been made up. He didn't care how stupid he'd feel for believing it. He didn't care about the tears smearing his face. He just wanted to know for certain that it wasn't true.

'Hold on, Gran.' He paused under a street lamp and pulled his quivering hand from his pocket. No blood. He turned it palm down. No teeth marks. It wasn't even hurting, now he thought about it. Old Erica hadn't bitten him properly at all – she'd just pretended. And he'd believed her. Him and his overactive imagination! If the skin wasn't even broken she couldn't have passed on any curse, could she? She *couldn't* have.

'Toby?' said Gran. 'Is there something wrong with your hand?'

'No. It's fine.' Toby wrapped his arms around his wonderful gran and squeezed her tight. 'It's fine, Gran. It's absolutely fine!'

Curses weren't real.

They were *cobblers*. They were *nonsense*.

But as they drove towards Gran's little cottage, there was still a pulsing in Toby's ears and a rushing in his blood. There was still a thumping in his heart and a tremble in his bones.

When they reached the cottage, he stepped out of the car into the darkening night. The wolf moon had climbed in the sky. Only a small curve at its base was left hidden by the hills. Soon, it would be fully risen, as bright and powerful as a precious silver amulet.

