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Chapter Four

Heavy Glow

Despite his tiredness, Nat lay awake. The windows in the roof were both open, but because his room was at the top of the house it was still baking hot. Apart from the occasional gunfire wafting up from the film two floors down and the whirr of the fan, the night was still and quiet. As his eyes closed, he thought fleetingly about the tattoo on Woody's neck, but no sooner had the thought surfaced, than he fell asleep.

When he woke, Nat felt even more uncomfortable, but cooler; a refreshing breeze was blowing his hair back from his sweaty forehead. He opened his eyes groggily. The book-lined walls of his bedroom had gone, replaced with trees, their leaves glowing eerily in the moonlight. He was lying on a bed of pine needles and leaves, no wonder he was uncomfortable. *Where was he? This is a dream, right?* But if it *was* a dream, he had never experienced one so real before. He looked up at the enormous moon, shielding his eyes, it was so unnaturally bright.

Disorientated and frightened, Nat rose from the woodland floor and brushed his pyjama bottoms with trembling hands. *Maybe I've been sleepwalking,* he thought to himself in alarm. *It all seems so real.* He felt a stab of terror. It was real: somehow he'd found himself in the forbidden East Wood in the middle of the night, *and he was not alone*.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement from an enormous fan of bracken which framed the moonlit path. He watched, unable to move, as a long, thin figure unfolded itself from the middle of the foliage like a charmed snake emerging from its basket. At first, Nat thought it was a man but, as his eyes adjusted to the moonlight, he saw that whatever it was, *it was not human*. The skin was a mottled,

dead grey; the thin legs bowed but topped with powerful thighs, roped with muscle. The hideous torso, sprinkled with coarse black fur, was attached to the head of a wolf with fangs that grew snaggled and pointed. The eyes were a wicked, raddled orange, burning malevolently as they fixed on Nat, making him feel shaky and weak. He tried to move, but his legs wouldn't do what he wanted them to, which was to run like hell. A scream rose in his throat but died in his mouth, and he realised, with sickening horror, that the wolf thing was getting closer, although it hadn't appeared to move. It leered just a few metres away from him, and Nat seemed to be drifting towards the creature against his will; he had a surreal sensation of being gently lifted off the leafy floor of the wood and floating … floating, close enough to the wolf thing to look deep into its eyes. Nat felt himself relax as he stared into their fiery depths, and wondered why he had been afraid.

It's only a nightmare, he thought to himself, dreamily. *Any second now I'll wake up… UUUUUghh!* Barely centimetres away, the savage, corrupt stink of the wolf thing suddenly tore into Nat's senses like smelling salts. Gagging, Nat snapped his head back, the hypnotic effect broken, his eyes watering. The wolf thing made as if to grab him with an enormous misshapen paw, and as Nat turned to run, he fell forward, hitting the floor with a bone-jarring thump, and woke up, surrounded by familiar things again.

He laughed shakily. He was right. Nothing but a stupid nightmare, and now he had fallen out of bed. His heart was banging in his chest like a chorus of bongo drums and his pyjama top was sopping wet with sweat. He had an urge to call out for his dad, but reality hit him. His dad was gone, and there was no way he would call for his mum and upset her.

He closed his eyes and breathed in *hmmm* – and breathed out *hhoooo* – the

way his mum had taught him to relax. The bedroom was aglow with a cold white light; a light so strong, it felt *heavy.* Nat groaned. On top of the hideous nightmare, the street lights outside were working overtime. *Hang on though*; there *weren't* any street lights outside. And even if there were, they weren't tall enough to shine into his room; the slanted windows in the roof were too high. Still badly shaken, Nat got out of bed, his legs feeling weak and bendy like rubber, and stood on tiptoe to look out of the window.

A vast full moon hung in the velvety-blue night sky. The enormous white orb threw its penetrating light so strongly that the darkened areas on its surface, the seas, the plains and craters which were usually invisible glowed like silver.

Memories of the horrible creature and how it had stunk of dark, wet places surfaced, and Nat shuddered, feeling jumpy and itchy and strange. Knowing sleep would be impossible, he crept out on to the landing and past his grandparents' room, smiling slightly at the appalling noise of both of them snoring. It sounded just like several pigs were being slaughtered inside. Apple always denied snoring, but she was even noisier than Mick. Nat wondered how they could sleep with that row going on, then he remembered how loud the TV gunfire had sounded. They must be going deaf.

He opened the kitchen door and went in to get a drink of water. As he reached up into the cupboard for a glass, a sound made him freeze. Despite the heat, cold shivers slid up and down his limbs, and the tiny hairs at the back of his neck prickled and fizzed. He strained his ears to catch the sound again. It was as though someone was crying softly; someone who was upset, but didn't want anyone else to hear.

'Mum,' he hissed, 'is that you?'

No answer. Nat hesitated; if it was his mum, maybe she wouldn't like it if he barged in. He wondered if he should go back to bed. The weeping continued, and Nat

forgot about the glass of water.

He crept down the corridor to the scullery, opening the door on to the light of the moon. It lit up the garden so brilliantly that Nat could see as well as if it were daylight.

The crying sounds stopped abruptly. There was a movement in the corner by the washing machine.

‘Woody?’ croaked Nat, the spit he needed to talk with had almost dried up. ‘Come on, boy.’

There was a shuffling noise, like cloth being dragged, but what came out of the shadows was nothing like a dog. Nat’s mouth dried up completely.

Wrapped within Woody’s red, striped blanket was a boy. A boy of about Nat’s own age. They stared at each other.

‘Wh … wh … who are you?’ stammered Nat. ‘And where’s my dog?’

The boy shook his head, sniffling. Nat noticed that underneath the blanket the boy appeared to be naked. His eyes went as wide as they could, without popping out of his head.

‘I … look, excuse me, but where’s Woody, and … hey! Why are you naked?’

As soon as Nat had spoken, something clicked in his brain. He looked hard at the stranger, noticing how his cheeks were stained from crying. There was something odd about his eyes. They were an unusual light golden brown. In the dark shadows, they appeared to glow.

Noooo, thought Nat, confused. *It can’t be… can it?*

‘Are … are you who I think you are?’ he stammered.

The boy just stared, his eyes glimmering golden light.

A purely selfish thought popped into Nat’s head. Just when he thought he had

a dog, this happened!

At last the boy spoke, in a halting, gravelly voice which sounded as though it wasn't used very often.

'You can … call me Woody,' he said quietly. 'But I'm not … a *dog*.'

Nat's legs gave way, and he slid to the floor. All this was too much. This was Gary the unicorn territory. *Whhooo, he wasn't ready for this*! The boy sat down too, wiping his eyes on the corner of the striped blanket.

Suddenly, Nat slapped himself smartly around the face: THWACK! The boy jumped at the sound and looked at Nat in alarm.

'Why did you … do that?' he asked, his curiosity stopping his tears.

'Because I'm dreaming,' said Nat, shaking his head. 'That's it. I must be! The moonlight's turned me mental! I'm really still in bed and you are still a dog, so goodnight to you.' He got up to leave.

Suddenly, the strange boy grabbed hold of Nat's pyjama sleeve. '*I'm not dog*,' he repeated.

Nat swallowed, trying not to let the boy see how scared he was. He glanced at the boy's hand, sensing enormous power and strength. *And his fingernails!* To Nat, they looked alarmingly like claws.

'Well, what are you then?' asked Nat bravely.

'Wolven,' the boy stated, removing his hand. 'Shape shifter.'

Nat stared in horror, remembering his dream.

'A *werewolf*,' he breathed, shrinking away from the strange boy and getting ready to run. He wondered if he could make it before the boy turned into a wolf and ripped out his heart, or whatever it was that werewolves did. As though he could read Nat's mind, the stranger sat down again, and put his shaggy head in his hands in

despair.

Nat hesitated. There was something about this strange person that was so familiar, so *Woody-like,* that he wanted to believe he would be safe. He cleared his throat to show he was still there. The boy raised his head and looked at Nat with sad eyes.

'OK,' said Nat, almost to himself. 'Werewolves turn into wolves at the full moon, or they do in the books I've read. I've never heard of a wolf turning into a boy.'

The boy shook his head again. 'Not werewoof, *Wolven*.'

Despite his fear, curiosity was getting the better of Nat. 'So do you, er … change back again in the morning? Sort of like a werewolf in reverse?'

The boy shivered and nodded. 'Can't stop it ... Dunno when it'll happen. A-Alec Tate didn't like it.'

Nat thought of the dreadful Tate. 'You mean he *knew*? He knew you weren't really a dog?'

The boy nodded. He lowered his voice. 'It's not so… complic… comp… it's *easier* if I stay Wolven. But I needed … to warn you… '

Nat's eyes narrowed as he remembered something. '*Heeeey.* I've rubbed your belly!'

The boy smiled for the first time. It was a sweet, familiar smile, but Nat couldn't help noticing the way his sharp, white teeth caught the light of the moon.

'I'm still Woody,' said the boy gently. 'Still your friend. Please help.'

Nat tried to think straight; he felt an instinctive liking for this strange boy, who obviously needed help, but then he remembered the horrific wolf thing in his nightmare. He shook his head, confused and petrified. *What if this boy turned into*

that … creature?

Again as if he could read Nat's thoughts, the boy's smile faded, his expression heartbreakingly sad.

'Wolven not monsters,' he said simply. 'Woody *born* this way, not *made*, like werewoofs.'

'Were*wolves,*' corrected Nat, remembering the hideous wolf thing in his nightmare.

The boy stood up and wrapped the blanket tightly around his thin body. Nat watched mute, as he hesitated at the door leading to the moonlit garden. Then, suddenly, the boy disappeared into the night. Nat was left sitting on the floor, wondering what on earth to do next. But as he was about to find out, when the astonishing happens, you just get on with it.