

*THE MOON MAY BE FLEETING, OR THE MOON MAY BE ETERNAL.
IT'S UP TO THE BEAST TO DECIDE.*



SHUN THE MOON

T E R R Y C A M P B E L L

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

1

NATASHA LIFTED HER MUZZLE to the heavens and inhaled deeply. An exhilarating blend of scents drifted through the cool night air, enticing her natural animal instincts, driving her to explore every opportunity available in her new-found freedom. She absorbed the smells wholly: the sweet petrichor of the rain-soaked earth, the decaying pine needles scattered along the forest floor, smoke from a chimney atop one of the many farmhouses that dotted the countryside. But these smells were lesser, weaker than the others, only remote diversions that served as little more than background clutter to the one scent that was now driving Natasha forward. This scent was much greater, overpowering all the others, leaving little doubt as to its origin. This was the musky, undeniable odor of a male.

Natasha's ears pricked, and she threw her head back, releasing a shrill, splitting howl into the foggy air. He was out there, in the deep woods, somewhere. He would answer her call, of that she was certain. Her breath hung around her, and she strained her acute hearing for his reply. There was none.

Natasha whimpered. He had been here, and not long ago. She was sure of that; the scent was just too powerful. Puzzled, Natasha

dropped her snout to the ground and began shuffling through the leaves, trying desperately to pick up a stronger dose of the driving scent. She found it difficult to locate an exact source of the odor; it seemed as if his smell was everywhere, drifting through the pine branches, rising from the moist soil, surrounding her, following her every step. This confused Natasha's senses, for it betrayed everything known to her natural instincts. She should be able to follow a direct scent but couldn't.

Natasha squatted close to the ground and urinated. Perhaps if she marked his territory, he would pick up Natasha's own scent and come to her. She lowered her head and sniffed the musky odor of her own glands. The aching in her loins was becoming almost unbearable. Never before, even in her most intense cycles of heat, had Natasha felt such an urge. She turned and sent another long, lonely cry into the darkness, but still, he did not answer.

Natasha began to move on. Her anxieties would not allow her to stay in one place for too long. She had to keep trying, following the scent that was all around her, hoping to pick up a trail of the elusive object of her desire.

Natasha turned toward a sudden noise, and when the breeze met her nostrils, she almost swooned from the sudden, overpowering odor. It was the same, unattached smell she had encountered all evening, but its strength was unmistakable now. He had arrived. She uttered a low warning growl out of pure instinct. She could hear his heavy breathing, but he made no other sounds. Natasha snarled aggressively, hoping to draw him into the open, but he did not appear. Why did he not answer her? Why was he hiding? Determined to find the unseen intruder, Natasha moved forward. His scent grew stronger, making her head spin faster. The aching in her body intensified, and she growled again. Each breeze brought his musk deeper into her nose, and she moved closer to him.

Suddenly, Natasha stopped. The intense odor had abruptly vanished; now only the discorporate, floating scent remained. The sound of his breathing was gone as well, the forest quiet but for the chirping of crickets, and the distant hoot of an owl. She growled softly, more a defensive maneuver than anything, for she was suddenly frightened. All signs of the mysterious intruder were gone. He had simply vanished.

Natasha inhaled deeply one more time and suddenly bristled in fear. He was behind her. How had he moved so swiftly, so silently? She could hear his breathing once again, and the sound of his heavy feet crunching the leaves as he moved toward her. Still anxious, but tingling with anticipation, Natasha turned to face him.

He was large—much larger than her. His coat was as black as the night, glistening in the light from the moon, and his eyes glowed a deep blood red. Natasha's eyes met his, and for the first time, he spoke—a low guttural snarl that seemed to shake the very earth on which she stood. His hot breath blew steam high into the crisp air, and a long string of saliva dripped from his yellowed teeth, and dropped, sizzling in the moist dirt.

Natasha growled as he bared his teeth in a wide, sadistic grin. Her heart beat rapidly with the anticipation of mating. The wolf began to circle her in an attempt to move up behind her. Natasha crept backwards teasingly, trying to keep the beast away from her. She growled at him to stay away, but his growl was fiercer, clearly announcing his intentions. He moved his snout to her backside and sniffed ravenously. Natasha snarled again, and the wolf snapped at her hind leg. Natasha yelped and turned her head back to him, snapping in return, but he continued to explore her backside. Slowly, the desire she had felt earlier began to grow inside her, building in her lower extremities a fire she had never felt so intensely. Natasha moaned at the wolf's incessant advances, and she backed into him. She could feel his body stiffen as he mounted her from behind.

Natasha quivered and her legs buckled under as the great beast entered her. She cried out at the unexpected power of the black creature. Each thrust of his powerful hindquarters threatened to knock her to the ground, and he shouted his disapproval each time she stumbled. She tried to hold herself up, but the great beast pushed harder, and she found it more difficult to stand under his oppressive weight. His savage growls began to frighten Natasha; her natural instincts for survival began to override the urge to mate. He grabbed the nape of her neck in his strong jaws and bit down. Natasha could feel a warm trickle of blood as it oozed from her neck and matted her fur. Natasha cried out in terror; this animal frightened her. His unnatural appearance and overtly powerful mating were beyond what she could comprehend as normal animal functions.

The wolf's body was rock-hard as he continued his incisive advances. He was so muscular, so large. Natasha's knees began to weaken further, and she spilled to the ground. Angered by the interruption, the wolf backed away momentarily. Natasha, sensing an opportunity, tried to scramble to her feet, but he was so large and quick that he was on her again. She squirmed beneath him, trying to keep him from reentering her. Once again, he sank his fierce jaws into her, and Natasha howled in pain. She writhed and twisted beneath him, but she could not budge the terrifying animal. He shook her neck in anger, sending tufts of fur flying in either direction. Natasha snapped and snarled at air, trying hopelessly to spoil his attempts, but the beast would not be denied.

• • •

The Potters Sheriff's Department cruiser glided down the lonely, hilly stretch of Highway 92, its tires singing along the asphalt road. It was one of the few asphalt roads in Potters, Maine, a small farming community whose secondary roads were combinations of gravel and clay at best. A peach morning glow peeked between the branches of the coniferous trees that lined either side of the highway. The sky was cloudless after the previous night's rains.

Inside the squad car, deputies Blane "Smitty" Smith and Oliver Mason said little. The silence was broken only by occasional blips from the radio. That was normal fare for the small town of Potters, Maine. Normal, that is, until recently.

"What do you think we'll find?" Mason asked.

Smitty shrugged. "We probably won't find anything out on this side of town." He glanced out the driver's window at the rustic countryside. "Not many farms out this way."

The missing livestock issue was becoming big news among the townspeople. The reports were widely scattered and usually occurred no more than once or twice a month, but the farmers were getting restless. The losses weren't great, but to a small town like Potters, in which almost every resident had a vested interest, the loss of even one cow was intolerable. Everyone had a theory; everyone had an answer. Sheriff Barnes suspected rustlers. Fred Hackles, a local farmer, believed it was wolves. Others thought it was teenaged pranksters coming down from one of the larger towns such as Franklin. Everyone

had an answer, but the simple fact remained: farmers were still losing animals.

Until last night, no physical evidence had been found. Trevor Blaylock had called early that morning. He had a mutilated heifer in his back pasture.

"What do you think it is?"

Smitty sighed. The younger Mason annoyed him at times by asking so many questions. Just like a damn kid, he thought. Why is the sky blue? Why is water wet? Why do dogs bark and cats meow? Smitty glanced over at Mason but said nothing.

"I would've kept going with Sheriff Barnes' theory if this cow hadn't been found. Now, I just don't know. Maybe it *is* wolves."

Smitty snorted. "Except, there haven't been any wolves in Maine in years."

"That's true," Mason admitted. Then, his eyes seemed to light up. "Hey! What about dogs? Just a pack of wild dogs? You know, people get German shepherds and Rottweilers for their kids, never even thinking about how big they'll get. And when they grow up, they just dump 'em out in the country somewhere."

Smitty stared ahead at the road. "Mason, there aren't enough people in this whole county to buy enough dogs to dump somewhere to form a pack of wild, vicious dogs."

Mason twisted his lips and shrugged. "Well, they could've—"

His words were cut off as deputy Smith slammed on the brakes, bringing the squad car to a screeching, skidding halt.

"Jesus, what are you doing? Tryin' to get us killed?"

Mason readjusted his hat atop his head and looked at Smitty. Smitty was pointing to the side of the road. Deputy Mason followed the path of Smitty's finger.

And then he saw it. There was something on the side of the road, and it was moving. It was not a large object. Uniform brown in color, it seemed to be some sort of animal.

"What do you think it is?" Mason asked.

Smitty didn't mind this question. It seemed highly appropriate, but he didn't have an answer.

The two deputies continued to stare at the unidentified object. It kept moving only slightly, as if slowly exploring the ground at its

feet, shuffling from left to right. Suddenly, it stood upright on two legs. It turned to face the squad car, a single pinecone in one hand.

"Oh, shit," said Smitty, embarrassed.

He and Mason looked at one another. "Coogan."

Jackie Coogan was easily one of the most discussed characters in Potters. The village idiot, the town drunk, the local legend. The entire population knew him as the peculiar old man who lived on the outskirts of town in a tiny aluminum trailer, and who supplemented his income by collecting aluminum cans and pinecones, though what he did with the pinecones was anyone's guess. He could always be seen in the early mornings, rain or shine, toting his bags up and down highway 92.

The little old man stood staring at the cruiser. His cracked and weather-beaten face, heavy with stubble, peered from the confines of a blue winter hat. His dirty brown overcoat covered him from shoulders to feet. He held a filthy burlap sack in each hand. One seemed to be more stuffed than the other. The old guy looked away from the deputies and placed the pinecone into the fuller bag.

Smitty and Mason got out of the car and walked down the small incline to where Coogan stood.

"Morning, Mr. Coogan."

The old man glared at the two deputies with a scornful eye. "Deputies," he said, in a cracked, whiny voice.

"Whatcha got in the sacks?"

"You know what I got in the sacks, son. You stop me nearly every blamed morning."

"Now, now. You didn't answer my question." Smitty prodded Mason in the arm and shook his head, silently reprimanding the younger officer.

"I know. I know. Cans and pinecones," Mason said.

Coogan turned away from the officers, kicking at a bright object on the ground that turned out to be just a gum wrapper.

"What is it exactly that you do with these pinecones, old timer?"

Without turning around, Coogan said, "I make crafts with 'em, you know that."

"Well, how come I've never seen any of these crafts?"

"Maybe you've never bought any," replied the old man.

"We haven't been drinking already this morning, have we?" Deputy Mason enjoyed pestering the elderly man.

"I haven't, Deputy. Have you?"

Smitty turned away and snickered. Mason looked at him and back at Coogan.

"Am I being arrested?" Coogan asked Smitty.

Deputy Smith chuckled and slapped Mason across the back. "No, Coogan. You're free to go about your business. Just be careful. Don't get too close to the road."

Smitty motioned for Mason to return to the squad car. Mason frowned at the old man before turning up the slope. "Crazy old bastard."

Smitty closed the car door and fastened his seat belt. He smiled to himself. He enjoyed seeing Coogan throw one of Mason's annoying questions back in his face.

"Sells those cans to buy liquor, I'll bet. What do you think?"

"I don't know."

Smitty started the engine and pulled the car back onto the highway, spewing gravel behind them.

"Crafts," mumbled Mason, disgusted. "What do you suppose he does with those pinecones?"

"I don't know, Mason. Maybe he wipes his ass with them."

The cruiser passed the old man. He was at the edge of the trees, bending over, picking up a pinecone.

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Jackie Coogan stood at the base of the ditch, watching the deputies speed away, the squad car throwing dust and small bits of asphalt gravel over the two-lane road. He watched until the black-and-white cruiser disappeared over the crest of the hill, then added his latest pinecone to the rest of his morning collection. He held the bags up evenly, testing the weight of each. The pinecone bag was much heavier; it always was. Cans were scarce in the small town, but each one counted. It was a little more money to add to his monthly pension checks from Boyd Cannery, the factory where he had worked for twenty-two years. And the pinecones? They were just a hobby really; Coogan thought they were pretty. He didn't make crafts

from them. He would never blatantly commercialize something of nature. He just said that to the annoying looky-loos to shut them up.

Coogan began to move on down the highway toward his trailer. It was still early, but he wanted to be closer to home before the sun got too bright. It wouldn't be hot in the late September afternoon, but he was an old man, and any bit of humidity tended to wear him out.

Coogan stole a glance down the highway and thought of the Potters police force. He disliked that damned Deputy Mason. He was a smart-ass kid, still wet behind the ears, full of himself and his so-called power. He took every opportunity he could to harass Coogan. Smitty was okay; Coogan never really had any trouble with him. And Sheriff Barnes was all right as well. Then there was Stoner. Stoner was made from a different mold altogether.

Coogan shuddered. He didn't like to think of Deputy Stoner at all. Stoner didn't bother Coogan much, but Coogan hated their occasional run-ins all the same. Stoner had a quiet, confident air about him that somehow chilled Coogan.

The rest of the town pretty much dismissed Coogan as harmless, and that's just the way he wanted it. They could call him a drunk, a bum, a drifter (even though he'd lived in Potters longer than many of its denizens), whatever they liked. He heard them in town as he walked down the cracked sidewalks on the main stretch of town, inside the general store where the locals sat around playing dominoes. It didn't matter to Coogan. As long as they stayed away from him, minded their own business and let him tend to his, they could call him Satan for all he cared.

The trouble was, if anything went wrong in town, and the sheriff's office didn't have an explanation for the good citizens of Potters, Coogan's name was the first to come up. There was the incident back in summer when the kids were driving down from Johnson County, breaking windows and knocking down mailboxes, and who did the townsfolk blame? Old Coogan, that's who. Damn fools. Coogan couldn't even swing a baseball bat or throw a rock without his arthritis killing him. But such was the duty of the town scapegoat. Take the blame for what the inept city officials couldn't figure out.

Coogan had been reading about the missing livestock. Every now and then, about once or twice a month, some farmer would call the

sheriff's office complaining that he was missing a few head of cattle. The police would investigate, but no one ever found the missing animals. Coogan figured it was only a matter of time before he got the blame for that, too.

Coogan bent over, spying a mud-encrusted can, and pulled it from the ground. The beer can had been there for a while. Must've missed that one before, he thought. Coogan dropped the can into his sack and turned to head home.

The missing cattle and his impending bout with the sheriff's office were still on Coogan's mind, which frightened him even more when he saw the wolf break from the trees along the side of the road.

• • •

"Oh, shit," David Wagner mumbled.

He bent down and inspected the broken link in the chain and sighed. He had had every intention of having a chain link fence installed around his backyard for some time now, but it was one of those things that he just kept putting off. This was bound to have happened sooner or later. Disgusted with himself, David tossed the chain aside and peered off into the hills that led to the forest behind his house.

"Shit," he whispered again.

The sun was just beginning to peek over the distant tree line, and that had David worried. In the last few months, there were several instances of missing livestock among the farmers and ranchers of Potters. Many people had offered opinions and suggestions as to who or what was responsible and how to deal with it. Among the ideas were the existence of wolves. Natasha was 98% MacKenzie Valley timber wolf, 2% Alaska malamute. She looked exactly like a wolf, and for all intents and purposes, she was a wolf. David knew the backwoods mentality of some of the town's farmers. If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck ... David had to find Natasha, and quickly.

David scrambled to his Jeep, determined to locate her before the sun rose much higher in the sky. As he wheeled the vehicle out of his yard, he caught the end of a farm report on KRLY-AM. A cow had been found mutilated in local farmer Trevor Blaylock's back field. David knew Trevor Blaylock; they were neighbors, and Blaylock was high

on the list of those who suspected wolves. He had given David some wary glances several times during David's morning walk with Natasha. It was only a matter of time before he started crying "wolf".

The fact that an actual carcass had apparently been discovered worried David as well. He had hoped that the culprit would turn out to be human: rival farmers, wayward kids, whatever. Now, it was apparent that the problem was indeed an animal of some sort.

David smashed his hand against the steering wheel and cursed. "Dammit, Natasha! Where are you?"

David glanced toward Blaylock's house as he passed along highway 92. There was a police car parked in front. David caught just a quick glance, but he thought it was Deputy Stoner. He didn't like Stoner. He had that "I'm a badass cop and I carry a gun and there ain't shit you can do about it" kind of attitude. But Stoner was the least of his problems.

David ran his fingers through his hair and sighed. The thought of losing Natasha was something he hoped he wouldn't have to face, not for a long time anyway. He had purchased Natasha from a breeder near Flagstaff, Arizona just a few weeks before he moved to Maine. She was six weeks old at the time and the most adorable puppy—*pup*, he corrected himself—David had ever seen. He hadn't really planned on buying a dog at the time, but he had needed something to help take his mind off his divorce from Mindy. The \$400 dollar price tag and all the special training and care required to properly raise a wolf-hybrid were well worth it. Natasha had turned out to be the most loyal and loving thing—animal or human—that David had ever known. Her companionship was undying.

David, a freelance writer of magazine articles, lived alone. His article on wolf-hybrids in *Dog Fancy* was well received. His career, and his current location, didn't offer much in the way of social activities. Add to that the stress and paperwork of a divorce. Natasha was his only companion. She was his pet, sure, but sometimes, he thought it might go deeper than that. Sometimes, in that lonely old farmhouse in the middle of a forested mountain, where a more superstitious man might start hearing noises and seeing ghosts in the solitude, David thought he might crack if it weren't for Natasha's ever-present company. And now, he thought, she was alone and in an environment that didn't match up well with her.

David crept the Jeep along the sides of the road, keeping far over on the shoulder, and glanced from left to right for any clue to Natasha's whereabouts. He glanced at the radio clock. It was 8:30. David could see that the sun had now risen completely above the tips of the coniferous trees alongside the road. The sky had grown much lighter.

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Jackie Coogan stood perfectly still and tried to stay calm. The big wolf had just stepped from the trees and into the clearing along the roadside. He didn't think it had seen him yet. Maybe if he stood still, it wouldn't.

The wolf lifted its muzzle higher and sniffed. Coogan realized what a beautiful animal it was. That was stupid. Like admiring a speeding, bright red sports car seconds before it smears you all over the highway. The wolf's fur was matted and muddy, but the thick silver/gray coat was still evident. The animal had a sort of regal manner to it as it stood tall, sniffing the early morning air. Coogan was about to relax when the wolf peered directly at him.

"Oh lordy," he whispered.

The animal's unblinking brown eyes stared into Coogan's. He tried to get a reading through the wolf's eyes, its body language, anything, but the wolf was not telegraphing its next move. It simply stood perfectly still, as if it were waiting for Coogan to move. Coogan did not break his eye contact with the animal. He tried to show no fear, though he was scared witless. Why couldn't those damn deputies drive by now?

The wolf tilted its head slightly, as if studying the little man in front of it. Its tail moved up over its back. Coogan relaxed his stance slightly. Something in the animal's deep brown eyes calmed him. It didn't seem like it was going to attack.

That's when Coogan noticed the collar, and a short moment later, the piece of chain trailing from the collar to the ground.

"Jiminy," he scoffed. "It's just a dog. It's a husky or something like that." He started to take a step toward the dog.

The animal stepped back, its ears pointing skyward. *You damn fool*, Coogan thought. *A tame dog can chew your stupid throat out just as easily as a wolf if it takes a notion to.* Coogan dropped to one knee and showed his hands to the dog.

"C'mere, boy," he called quietly. "Come to old Coogan. He ain't gonna hurt you."

The dog's ears laid back, and for a millisecond, Coogan wondered if it was a show of friendship or aggression. Then, its tail wagged, and the dog approached Coogan.

"There," he said. "I'm not gonna hurt you, boy."

He began to inspect the animal. What Coogan thought was mud turned out to be dried blood. There was a deep cut along the nape of the dog's neck. He felt along the belly of the animal for more wounds.

"Oh," he said. "Seems I owe you an apology. You're a girl, not a boy."

Other than the cut on the neck and the dirty coat, the animal seemed to be fine. Coogan rubbed the top of her head briskly, and the dog seemed to enjoy the attention. He ran his hand along the thick fur under her chin, hoping to find an identification tag. He did.

"Natasha'," he read. "David Wagner. Box 32. Highway 92.' You're not too far from home, are you girl?"

Coogan stood up and looked down the road. "Let's see now. Thirty-two should be north from here, I think." He rubbed the whiskers on his chin for a moment before deciding. "Yeah, I think so." He turned to Natasha. "You want to go back home to your owner? You're probably getting pretty hungry, aren't you?"

Natasha jumped up and barked once. She certainly is a friendly dog, Coogan thought. And there I was thinking she was a wolf.

"C'mon, let's get you home."

• • •

"You're the old farm hand, Trevor. You tell me what it is," said Deputy Devin Stoner.

He stared down at the half-eaten carcass of the Holstein heifer at his feet. From the back, one might think the cow was just lying down. It wasn't until one walked around to the other side, saw the huge open cavity in the animal's belly, the ravaged pile of purple entrails, that the obvious became apparent. The poor animal's eyes were locked open in a dying squeal of terror. The early morning sun had already drawn the flies in scores.

"I just don't think it could be a pack of wild dogs," Trevor Blaylock said. "The grass around the body isn't smashed flat enough to indicate more than one animal." He looked back at Deputy Stoner.

Stoner was a large, imposing figure. He stood about 6' 4", all of it solid muscle. His blonde, longish hair—long for a deputy—framed his ruddy face and his piercing blue eyes.

Stoner sighed and looked at Blaylock. He found it amusing that he was standing here discussing the possible cause of this cow's demise when the remnants of the animal's innards lay comfortably digesting in Stoner's stomach even as they spoke. He had slain the animal the previous night in another nocturnal tirade, slit open the animal's fat belly, and feasted on its stinking guts. Devin Stoner was a lycanthrope of the most vicious type. He was responsible for all the lost cattle of the previous weeks. The early autumn air had invigorated him, driving his moon-powered thirst for blood to new levels, as it so often did as the day of the Festering, the annual gathering of evil lycanthropes, grew nearer.

"Well, you've got no tracks here, what with all the grass. Nothing I can do there."

"Yeah, well it damn sure ain't no kids. Never did believe that story anyway. Devil-worshippers and what not."

"Well, you never know."

"C'mon, Deputy. You've been watching too much Oprah."

Stoner rested his hand on his Browning 1910 9mm and turned from the dead cow. "Well, that's about all I can do this time. We'll make more rounds down the highway at night. Check on each farm. That sort of thing." He turned to face Blaylock. "But if you want my opinion, I think this thing will pass before too long. Give it some time."

"I don't have time, Deputy," Blaylock said angrily. "I've lost ten head of cattle so far. I can't afford that. This has got to stop."

"Well, until we have more to go on, there's not a lot we can do."

"Wait a minute," said Blaylock, holding up a hand. "I've got something you can check out."

Stoner raised his eyebrows, expecting another of the many crazy suggestions the farmers had been offering. Blaylock pointed past his barn.

"What?" Stoner said, annoyed. He wasn't a damned retriever.

"Next door. Wagner."

"What? You think Wagner did it? That's ridiculous."

"Not Wagner. That goddamn wolf of his."

Stoner shrugged his broad shoulders. He knew about Blaylock's neighbor's unusual pet. It was half-wolf half-husky, or something like that.

"Yeah, you see I'm right, don't you?" boasted Blaylock, sensing a feeling of agreement from Stoner.

"It's possible," Stoner admitted. "But why would his dog do this? It shouldn't need to feed on anything but its own dog food."

"It doesn't kill to eat. It's a fuckin' wolf, for God's sake. It enjoys killing!"

"Isn't it fenced in?"

"Nope. Keeps it chained to a tree out back. Go see for yourself."

"Well, if nothing else, he shouldn't keep it restrained only by a chain. That could be dangerous."

Blaylock held his hands out toward the house down the way as if to show directions. Stoner peered at him for a moment.

"Well, I'll check into it if it'll make you happy. That's what the Potters Sheriff's Department is here for. To make you people happy," he said, winking at Blaylock.

"Just do your damned job, Deputy."

Deputy Stoner turned and headed back through the field to his squad car. He didn't care much for Trevor Blaylock. He didn't care much for anyone. But as long as Blaylock kept coming up with new explanations for the disappearance of the livestock, as long as all the stupid locals continued to offer their opinions, he would have something else on which to blame the disappearances. Maybe it would keep the townspeople off his back for a while, make life easier for Devin Stoner the law enforcer as well as for Devin Stoner the blood-thirsty killer.

• • •

David had driven up and down highway 92 several times, as well as a few back roads, but there was still no trace of Natasha. He began to realize that the hope of finding her in this secluded country was very remote. He would have to hope she made it back home on her own, and that none of the farmers found—

The sight ahead of him filled David with mixed feelings of joy and worry. It was Natasha, being led on her broken chain by Jackie Coogan.

David had never actually met Jackie Coogan. He saw Coogan pass in front of his house several times a week dragging those two burlap

sacks and often wondered what was in them before realizing it might be best if he didn't know. He would see Coogan in town now and then, but their only communication might be a passing nod at best. He had heard all the local opinions of the little old man who lived on the outskirts of town. All those myths combined with the strange visage the man presented led David to believe that Jackie Coogan was a man best left alone.

The only trouble now was that he had David's dog.

David suddenly realized that the man was walking away from the far end of town, away from Coogan's trailer. He must be bringing Natasha home to me, David thought. Thank God for that ID tag.

David pulled the Jeep over to the side of the road, threw it into Park, and jumped from the vehicle. Coogan had turned around to face the new arrival.

"Mr. Coogan?" David called out with caution.

The man stared apprehensively at David. Recognition swept across Natasha's face, but she did not leave Coogan's side. "Can I help you, son?" asked Coogan.

"Yes, sir. That's my dog," David said, trying to sound polite as possible.

"Oh, yeah?" Coogan eyed David suspiciously. "What's your name?"

"David Wagner."

Coogan knelt and felt for the tags again. David watched the old man, amused. Coogan stood back up and smiled. "So, you are."

"Where did you find her?"

Coogan pointed back to the south. "About two miles up the highway. She came out of the bushes. 'Bout scared the piss outta me. I thought she was a wolf."

"She's part wolf," explained David. "A wolf-hybrid."

"Zat a fact?"

"Look, Mr. Coogan. It is Coogan, isn't it?" The man nodded. "I appreciate you finding her, but I'll take her from here, if you don't mind."

"No, not at all. She's your dog, Mr. Wagner."

David reached for the chain, but Natasha held her ground. "Let's go home, girl," David coaxed. Natasha whimpered. "It's amazing how she's taken up with you. Hybrids just don't do that."

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"Animals take to me real easy, son. `Specially dogs."

"Yeah, but she's not a dog," said David. It's probably the odor, he thought rudely. "Well, I can't thank you enough, Mr. Coogan."

"Just Coogan would be fine. No need for fancy formalities."

David nodded. "Thanks again."

Coogan nodded and turned back to the north, slinging one of the bags over his shoulder. David heard the faint clink of metal.

"Coogan?" he called. "What's in the bags?" Coogan gave David a strange look. David sensed the insult in Coogan's eyes. "If ... if you don't mind my asking." He suddenly felt very foolish.

Coogan nodded. "Aluminum cans in one, pinecones in the other."

Before David could stop his mouth, he heard himself ask, "Pinecones? Why do you hunt pinecones?"

Coogan smiled. "I make crafts out of 'em."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terry Campbell wrote extensively during the 1990s, appearing in numerous anthologies (*Horrors! 365 Scary Stories*, *Blood Muse*, *Kiss and Kill: the Hot Blood Series*) and small press magazines (*Terminal Fright*, *After Hours*, *Into the Darkness*). But sometime during the 2000s, he drifted away from the keyboard. Then, in 2023, spurred on by an odd dream he thought would make a good story, his wife surprised him with a new laptop. And the bug was back. He started writing again and hasn't stopped, with appearances in anthologies such as *What Lurks?: A Cryptid Anthology*, *Hellbound Book's Horror Anthology*, *After Dark: A Horror and Thriller Anthology*, and many more. Visit him on his website at alittlewestofweird.com.

When Natasha—a three-year-old wolf hybrid—escapes her owner’s yard for a fun frolic in the wilderness, she is assaulted by a vicious male wolf, an incident that plunges her into a world in which she unknowingly already existed yet never appreciated the scope.

Lycanthropy.

Subsequent events release a swirl of human emotions: love, family, tragedy, loss, and fear. Sentiments familiar to her canine mind, but never with this much understanding and clarity.

And always lurking in the background, powered by the moon, the terrifying beast who now claims her as his own.



Terry Campbell writes his horror and western fiction from his writing den, “the Saloon”, with a glass of sotol and the near-constant distraction of his dogs. His short fiction has appeared in numerous anthologies. You may hang out with him at alittlewestofweird.com.