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Kitty's Greatest Hits (Kitty Norville)

By Carrie Vaughn



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The first-ever story collection from the *New York Times* bestselling author, including two all-new works!

Kitty Norville, star of a *New York Times* bestselling series, is everybody's favorite werewolf DJ and out-of-the-closet supernatural creature. Over the course of eight books she's fought evil vampires, were-creatures, and some serious black magic. She's done it all with a sharp wit and the help of a memorable cast of werewolf hunters, psychics, and if-not-good- then-neutral vampires by her side. *Kitty's Greatest Hits* not only gives readers some of Kitty's further adventures, it offers longtime fans a window into the origins of some of their favorite characters.

In "Conquistador de la Noche," we learn the origin story of Denver's Master vampire, Rick; with "Wild Ride," we find out how Kitty's friend T.J. became a werewolf; and in "Life is the Teacher," we revisit Emma, the human-turned-unwilling-vampire who serves the aloof vampire Master of Washington, D.C.

This entertaining collection includes two brand-new works: "You're On the Air," about one of Kitty's callers after he hangs up the phone; and the eagerly awaited "Long Time Waiting," the novella that finally reveals just what happened to Cormac in prison, something every Kitty fan wants to know.



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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for Carrie Vaughn:

“Vaughn melds a near-future world torn by war with the legend of the fall of Troy in this brilliantly structured, beautifully written stand-alone.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review on *Discord's Apple*

“Carrie Vaughn weaves a gorgeous tapestry of the human condition in a post apocalyptic world filled with mystery, magic, and immortals. Her world-building is masterful!”

—L. A. Banks, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Thirteenth* on *Discord's Apple*

About the Author

Carrie Vaughn is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the Kitty Norville books, including *Kitty's Big Trouble*, *Kitty Goes to War*, and *Kitty and the Midnight Hour*. She is also the author of the standalone novels *After the Golden Age* and *Discord's Apple*, and the young adult books *Voice of Dragons* and *Steel*.

Vaughn had the nomadic childhood of the typical Air Force brat, with stops across the country from California to Florida. She earned her B.A. from Occidental College in Los Angeles, and a master's in English from the University of Colorado at Boulder. She has worked as a Renaissance Festival counter wench, a theater usher, an editor, a buyer at an independent bookstore, and an administrative assistant. She lives in Boulder, Colorado.

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IL EST NÉ

Hugging himself, shivering, David curled up under the reaching bows of a pine tree. A moonlit drift of snow glowed silver just a few feet away, outside his shelter. More snow was falling, and he was naked. If he simply relaxed, he wouldn't be that cold. But he was afraid. More afraid every time this happened.

He didn't know where he was, but that didn't bother him so much anymore. And how strange it was, that something like that didn't bother him. *That* was what bothered him. Not knowing, not remembering, had become normal. He didn't know where he was, but he knew exactly how he got here. It was getting harder to claw his way out of this space, to keep this from happening. He was losing himself.

The fire had taken him again. Blood rose and changed him. In a helpless surge, another body of fur and teeth, claw and sinew overcame him. The hunter, the wolf. He couldn't stop the Change. He could flee, stumbling into a wild place where no one would see him, where he wouldn't hurt anyone. Better that he stay here, because the pull was getting harder to resist. Easy to say that this was where he belonged, now.

Sometime in the last year, since this curse had landed on him, his thinking had switched. He wasn't a human who turned into a wolf. Instead, he was a wolf trapped in human skin. The wolf wanted to run away forever. Might be easier, if he just never returned to human. But he did.

At some point, he drifted back to sleep and woke to bright sunlight gleaming off the snow. Blinding, almost. It would be a beautiful day, with a searing blue Colorado sky, crisp snow, chilled air. And he couldn't really sit here under a tree, bare-ass naked, confused and depressed, all day.

Ultimately, that was what drew him back to civilization. He was still human, and the human grew bored. He'd walk, find a road, a town, steal some clothes. Figure out the date and how long he'd been out of it this time. Wander in the company of people, until the fire took him again.

* * *

Just because Kitty couldn't go home for Christmas didn't mean she had to be alone.

At least, that was the reasoning behind forcing herself to spend part of the day at a Waffle House off the interstate. It was the holidays, you were supposed to spend them with family, with voices raised in celebration, toasting each other and eating too much food.

Not that any of that was happening here. It was her, a couple of truckers, the waitress, the cook, a glass of middling nonalcoholic eggnog, and Bing Crosby on the radio. All in all this was one of the most depressing scenes she'd ever witnessed.

She was reading Dickens while sipping her eggnog. Not the obvious one, which hadn't lasted long, but *Bleak House*. The title seemed appropriate, and at three inches thick would last her a good long while.

Just a couple more hours, she thought. Long enough to have supper in the company of other people—no matter that no one had said a word to each other in half an hour. Then she'd go to her rented room, call her family to wish them happy holidays, and go to bed.

The music cut off, and Kitty looked up, ready to complain. The Christmas carols had been the only thing making this place bearable. How pathetic was that, clinging to old-school carols piped through the speakers of a cut-rate stereo? Behind the counter, the waitress pulled over a footstool and used it to reach the TV, sitting on a shelf high on the wall. She popped a VHS tape into the built-in slot.

As if she felt Kitty watching her, she—Jane, according to her name tag—looked over her shoulder and smiled.

"*It's a Wonderful Life*," Jane said. "I play it every year."

Oh, this was going to make Kitty cry.

The fact that Jane had spent enough years here to make it a tradition, not to mention she had the movie on videotape rather than DVD, somehow added to the depressing state of the situation. That could have been a lot of Christmases. Jane wasn't young: wrinkles had formed around her eyes and lips, and her curling hair was dyed a gray-masking brown. Waitressing at Waffle House didn't seem like much of a career. A stopgap maybe, a pay-the-bills kind of job on the way to somewhere else. It wasn't supposed to become your life. No one should have to work at Waffle House on Christmas every damn year.

Kitty set her book aside and leaned back in the booth to get a better view. There were worse ways to kill time. She'd watch the movie, then blow this Popsicle stand.

* * *

Amazing what people left on their clotheslines in the dead of winter. It was a small-town characteristic he'd come to depend on. Blue flannel shirt, worn white tee, wool socks. He wasn't desperate enough to steal underwear and went without. He found baling twine in a trash can and turned it into a belt to hold up a pair of oversized jeans. The work boots he found abandoned behind a gas station were a size too small. He didn't look great. He looked homeless, with shaggy brown hair and a five-o'clock shadow—five o'clock the next day. He *was* homeless. He only bothered because he felt he ought to. Walk through town and remind himself what it was like to be human. He *wanted* to be human. Wearing clothes reminded him. He'd loved his job—raft guide in the summer, ski instructor in the winter. Stereotypical Colorado outdoor jock. He and some of the guys wanted to start their own rafting company. He was going to go back to school, get a degree in business—

Not anymore.

David cleaned up as well as he could at the gas station restroom. The nice thing about stealing clothes off a clothesline—at least they were clean. He scrubbed his face, his hands, slicked back his hair, guessed that he didn't smell too awful. Squared his shoulders and tried to stand up straight. Tried to look human.

He regarded himself in a cracked mirror and sighed. He wasn't a bad-looking guy. He was young. He should have had his whole life ahead of him. But he looked at himself now and saw only shadows. His eyes gave off

a shine of helplessness. Hopelessness. Their brown seemed more amber, and something else looked out of them. He was trapped in his own body. He washed his face again, trying to get rid of that expression. He could usually find an evening's work somewhere, washing dishes or sweeping up, if someone felt sorry enough for him. Enough to pay for a meal—a cooked, human meal. He hadn't yet resorted to panhandling. He'd rather run wild in the woods and never come back.

Near the interstate, the minimalist main street of this small town seemed quiet for an early evening. No cars drove by, only a couple were parked on the street. The only place open, with its sign lit up, was the Waffle House at the edge of town.

The smell of the town seemed strange after his days in the forest. His nostrils flared with the scent of oil, metal, and people. An inner voice told him this wasn't his place anymore. He ought to flee. But no—he was here, he'd make a go of it. Trying to soften the tension in his shoulders, willing himself to stay calm, he headed to the restaurant.

* * *

The bell hanging on the door rang as a man walked in. *What do you know, another angel gets his wings.* Kitty glanced over to see him, but his scent reached her first: wild, the musk of lupine fur hiding under human skin. In instinctive response, her shoulders tightened with the motion of hackles rising. She sat up, her hands clenching, the ghosts of claws reaching inside her fingers.

He was a werewolf. Just like her.

He froze in the still open doorway, his eyes wide. Clearly, he'd scented her as well, and was shocked. He looked like he might bolt. Their gazes locked, and Kitty's heartbeat sped up. A stare was a challenge, but this wasn't right, because the guy almost looked terrified. Like he didn't know what to do.

"You want to close that, honey? You're letting the warm air out." Jane smiled over the counter at the guy, and that broke the tension.

Kitty looked away—another bit of wolf body language, a move that said she wasn't a threat, and she didn't want to fight. She forced herself to settle back—and could sense him relax a notch as well, lowering his gaze, turning away. She desperately wanted to talk to him. What was he doing here? She didn't know of any werewolves within a hundred miles.

It was why she was here.

The man—young, disheveled, wearing ill-fitting clothing and a haunted expression—slouched inside his flannel shirt and moved to the counter.

He spoke softly to Jane, but Kitty held her breath and made out what he said. "Uh, yeah. I'm a little hard up, and I was wondering if there was anything I could do to earn a cup of coffee and a pancake or something." Jane smiled kindly. "Sorry, there's nothing. This is our slowest night of the year." The man looked around, at faded tinsel garlands strung around the walls, at the movie playing on the TV, and blinked at Jane in confusion. "It's Christmas," she said.

He glanced at the TV again with a look of terrible sadness.

This scene pushed all Kitty's curiosity buttons. The urge could not be denied.

It was all she could do not to rush straight at him, but if he'd been startled and tense with her just looking at him, she could imagine what that would do. He was on edge—more wolf than human almost, even though the full moon was over a week away.

She walked toward him, her gaze down and her posture loose. He backed up a step at her approach. She tried to put on a pleasant, nonthreatening face.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to interrupt, but you look like you could use a cup of coffee. Can I buy you one?"

She laced her hands behind her back. He started to shake his head, and she said, "No strings, nothing funny. Consider it a Christmas present from another one of the tribe who doesn't have anywhere else to go." She glanced at Jane, who smiled and reached under the counter for a cup and saucer.

"Hi. I'm Kitty." She offered her hand. Didn't really expect the guy to shake it, and he didn't. It wasn't a wolfish gesture. She'd never seen a lycanthrope look so out of place in human clothing.

He took a moment to register the name, then pursed his lips in a stifled laugh. He actually smiled. There was

a handsome guy under the hard times. "I'm sorry, but that's the funniest thing I've heard in a while." She wrinkled her nose. "It gets a little old, believe me."

"How did a were—" He cut himself off when Jane returned with the pot of coffee.

"Why don't we go talk about it?" Kitty said, nodding back toward her booth.

A moment later, they were sitting across from each other, each of them with fresh cups of coffee. Jane also brought over a plate of pancakes. David gazed up at her sheepishly, blushing. Embarrassed, Kitty decided. He didn't like the charity. But he drowned the pancakes with syrup and dug into them.

Around bites, he finished his thought. "How did a werewolf end up with a name like Kitty?"

"The better question is how did someone named Kitty end up as a werewolf. That's a long story."

"It's almost as bad as a werewolf named Harry."

Perish the thought. "Oh my God, your name isn't—"

"No," he said, ducking his gaze. "It's David."

"Well, David. It's nice to meet you. Though I have to say, I wasn't expecting to see another one of us walk through the door. Are you from around here?"

"No. I've been on the road awhile."

"That's what I thought."

He hadn't yet taken a sip of his coffee, but he wrapped a hand around the cup, clinging to it like he could draw out its warmth. He hunched over, gazing out at the world with uncertainty. He probably didn't realize how odd he seemed, coming out of the cold without a coat. Werewolves didn't feel the cold as much. Staring at the tabletop, he said, "I've never met another one. Not ever. But I could tell, as soon as I walked in here I could smell you and I knew. I almost walked right back out again."

"What, let a little old thing like me scare you off?" She'd meant it as a joke, but he flinched. She willed him to relax. His hand around the mug squeezed a little tighter. He set his fork down and pressed his fist to the table.

His voice was taut. "You seem so calm. How do you do it?" His eyes flickered up, and the look in them was stark. Desperate.

She froze, nerveless for a moment. Is that how she looked? Calm? She was exiled from her pack, driven from Denver by the alpha werewolves, and so was spending Christmas at a Waffle House in a desolate corner of the state and not with her family. She felt like she was on the verge of losing it. Without an anchor. She'd lost her anchor—but David had never had one.

"What about the one who turned you?"

"I was camping by myself, something ... something attacked me. It looked like ... I remember thinking, this is impossible, there aren't any wolves here. I knew something was wrong when I woke up, and I didn't have any wounds, no scars, and I didn't—"

He stopped, swallowed visibly, clamped his eyes shut. His breathing and heart rate quickened, and his scent spiked with fur and wild, wolf trembling just under his skin.

He didn't know how to control it at all, she realized. He hadn't had anyone to teach him. He'd been running as a wolf recently. Probably woke up with no idea where he was—no idea that it was Christmas, even.

Suddenly, her own situation didn't seem so bad.

"Breathe slowly," she whispered. "Think about pulling it in. Keep it together."

He rested his elbows on the table and ran his fingers through his hair. His hands were shaking. "I turn all the time. Not just on full moons. I can't stop it. Then I run, and I don't remember what happens. I know I hunt, kill whatever's out there—but I don't remember. I try to stay away from people, far away. But I just don't remember. I don't want to be like this, I don't—" His fingers tightened in his hair, his jaw clenched, teeth gritting. His wolf was right on the edge. Always right on the edge.

"Shh." She wanted to touch him, steady him, but didn't dare. Anything might set him off. And wouldn't that be a Christmas to remember? Werewolf rampage in a Waffle House in southern Colorado.... He might have done okay by Jimmy Stewart, but she'd like to see Clarence the angel fix that mess.

He looked at her. Square on this time. "How do you do it? What's your story?"

"I had a pack," she said. "They found me right after it happened to me. Like you, in the woods, attacked. But they took care of me. Told me what had happened, taught me how to deal with it."

"Does that happen?"

"Yeah, it does. There are probably more of us out there than you think. We keep quiet, stay hidden. At least, most of us do." And that was more story than she should probably go into at the moment.

"Where are they? Your pack."

Her smile turned wry. "I left. Or got kicked out. Depends on who you ask."

He looked crestfallen. The concept of a pack—the idea that he might not be alone—seemed to have heartened him. But that opportunity had once again become remote. "I didn't know. How was I supposed to know something like that was possible? I've been so alone."

What were the odds that his wandering brought him here, to her, perhaps the one werewolf in all the world who'd listen to his problems and want to help?

She said, "It doesn't have to be like that. You can control it. You can lead a normal life. Mostly normal, at least."

"How?" he said, teeth clenched, voice grating. Like she'd told him he could fly to the moon, or dig a hole and find a million dollars.

"You have to really want to."

Donning a smile that was more grimace, he glanced through the fogged window, to a graying, snowy parking lot. He spoke with sarcasm. "You make it sound so easy."

"I didn't say that. It's not easy. I spend a lot of time arguing with my inner Wolf."

"So do I. I lose."

"Then you have to figure out how to start winning."

He chuckled. "You ever think about going into the self-help business?"

She almost asked him if he listened to the radio much, or watched TV recently. Obviously he hadn't, or he would have already said something about her talk radio show.

She smiled slyly at the tabletop. "The idea had occurred to me."

David seemed calmer. Once or twice, Kitty had been accused of talking too much. But she found that talking improved almost every situation. Talking could make a lone werewolf on the run feel a little less lonely.

Jane marched in from the kitchen, straight toward the TV. Frowning, she pressed a cell phone to her ear.

"Okay," she said. "What channel?"

She pulled her stool under the TV again and stopped the tape. A cheerful Donna Reed cut off midsentence.

In place of the movie, Jane turned on a news station, turned up the volume, then moved away to watch.

A young news reporter was standing in a winter landscape, a windblown field in the foothills nearby, a few stray snowflakes drifting around her. She was lit with a harsh spotlight, striking in the evening darkness, and speaking somberly.

"... series of gruesome murders. The violence of these deaths has authorities concerned that the perpetrator may be using an attack dog of some kind. Police would not give us any further details. Authorities are asking residents to stay inside and lock their doors until the killer is apprehended."

Behind the woman a crime scene was in full swing: three or four police cars, an ambulance, many people in uniforms moving purposefully, and what seemed like miles of yellow caution tape. The camera caught sight of a spatter of blood on the ground and a filled body bag before the scene cut away.

A male reporter in a studio repeated the warning—stay indoors—and a scroll at the bottom listed the information: five deaths within the space of an afternoon, violence indicating a highly disturbed, animalistic killer.

Jane folded her phone away, hurried to the door, and locked it. "That's just a few miles up the road from here. I hope nobody minds," she said, regarding her customers with a nervous smile. No one argued.

He said he Changed, and hunted, and didn't remember.

For a long moment, Kitty stared at the stranger across from her. Nervously, he glanced away, tapping his fingers, slumped in the plastic booth like he didn't fit in the confined space.

She shouldn't have automatically been suspicious, but David's situation raised questions. Where had he come from? What had he been doing before he woke up and found—stole—the clothes he was wearing? Was it possible? The only thing she knew: David was a werewolf, and werewolves were capable of violent, bloody murder.

"Get up," she said to him, growling almost. She didn't like the feeling rising up in her—anger, which stirred her Wolf. Quickened her blood. Had to keep that feeling in check. But she'd offered him friendship and didn't want that to have been a mistake.

"What?" he said, voice low.

"Come on. In back. We have to talk." She jerked her head toward the bathrooms, down a little hallway behind her. Glaring at him, she stood and waited until he did likewise. She stormed into the back hallway, drawing him behind her.

Kitty pulled him into the women's restroom. If anyone noticed, let them think what they would. Keeping hold of his collar, she pushed him against the wall. Working on sheer bravado, she tried to act big and strong. He could throw her across the room if he wanted to. Trick was not to let him try. Dominate him, play the alpha wolf, and hope his instincts to defer to that kicked in.

"Where were you before you showed up here?" she demanded.

Whatever attitude she'd been able to pull out worked. He was almost trembling, avoiding her gaze. Mentally sticking a tail between his legs.

She hadn't been sure she could really pull it off.

"I was walking," he said. "Just walking."

"And before that?"

"I was out of it." He grew more nervous, looking away, scuffing his shoes. "I turned. I don't really know where I was."

"What do you remember?"

"I never remember very much." His voice was soft, filled with pain.

She understood what that was like—remembering took practice, control. Even then the memories were fuzzy, inhuman, taken in through wolf senses. He didn't have any of that control to begin with.

"Did you hunt?" she asked, hoping to spark some recollection. "Did you kill?"

"Of course I did! That's what we do, what we are."

He tried to pull away, cringing from her touch. She curled her lip in a snarl to keep him still.

"Think, you have to think! What was it? What did you kill? Was it big? Small? Did it have fur?"

He growled, his teeth bared, and an animal scent rolled off him.

She'd pushed him too far. She almost quailed and backed down. His aggression was palpable, and it frightened her. But she fought not to let that show. Stood her ground. Being alpha was a new feeling for her.

"So you could have killed someone," she said.

He pulled away and covered his face with his hands. She barely heard him whisper, "No. No, it's impossible. It has to be impossible."

He didn't know. Honestly didn't know. Now, what was she supposed to do about that?

She tried again, calmer this time. Pulled out whatever counseling skills she'd picked up over the last year.

"Try to think. Can you remember images? Scents, emotions. Some clue. Anything."

He shook his head firmly. "I don't know what it's like for you, but I don't remember anything. I don't know anything!"

"Nothing?"

"It's a blank. But you—how can you remember? You don't actually remember—"

"Images," she said. "The smell of trees. Night air. Trails. Prey." A long pause, as the memory took her, just for a moment. A flood of emotion, a tang of iron, euphoria of victory. Yes, she remembered. "Blood. Now, what do you remember?"

He dug the heels of his hands into his temples and dropped to a crouch. Gritting his teeth, setting his jaw, he groaned, a sound of anguish. Every one of his muscles tensed, the tendons on his hands and neck standing

out. He was shaking.

Alone, out of control, he was over the edge. She knelt by him and touched the back of his head—simple contact, chaste, comforting. “Keep it together,” she said. “Pull it in. Hold it in. Breathe slower. In ... out.”

She spoke softly, calmly, until he matched his breaths to the rate of her speech. Slowly, he calmed. The tension in his fists relaxed. He lowered his arms. His face eased from a grimace to a simple frown.

She stroked his hair and rested her hand on his shoulder. “It’s possible to keep some control and remember.”

“I used to have a life,” he said. “I just want my life back.”

She didn’t know what to say. Of course he wanted his life back. So much easier if everything could go back to the way it was before. Nearly every day she thought of it. But if you wanted that life back, you had to fight for it. Fight for that control, every day.

“What am I going to do?” he said, voice shaking, almost a sob.

“Nothing,” she said. “We wait.”

If he hadn’t done anything, nothing would come of this. Nothing would lead the police to him. But she didn’t want to even suggest that much. In case he had done something, and the police did come for him.

* * *

David took a moment to recover after Kitty left the bathroom. Not that a moment alone would help. He felt fractured. The parts of his being had scattered, for months now.

He didn’t understand her at all. She was like him—the same, another monster, a werewolf. And yet she was completely different. So ... with it. And he didn’t understand how she did it. How she looked so *calm*.

If he couldn’t remember what had happened, maybe he could learn what happened some other way. He couldn’t sit here waiting for the cops to find him and haul him away. Not that they could. The moment he felt danger, he knew what would happen—he would turn, and run.

He stepped to the end of the hall that tucked the bathrooms away from the restaurant. Kitty had returned to the booth. The waitress poured her more coffee, which she sipped. Hunched over the table, she looked out with a nervous gaze. He could see the wolf in her, intense brown eyes flickering to every movement, watchful, alert. Part of him was afraid of her, her strength and confidence. She’d had him cowed in a second. She believed he was a murderer, and he couldn’t deny it. Couldn’t say that she was wrong. He couldn’t be sure that she wouldn’t call the police. He’d only known her for an hour. She might be a monster like him, but she also seemed like the kind of person who would tell the police. A law-abiding werewolf. He never would have believed it.

He had to prove that he didn’t do it.

From the hallway, he ducked and slipped to the back of the kitchen, moving quickly so Kitty or the waitress wouldn’t see him. She’d think the worst.

One guy in the kitchen, a Latino wearing a white apron, looked at him. “Hey—”

David didn’t slow down but ran straight through the kitchen, unlocked the back door, and slipped out.

Outside, he paused, taking deep breaths of chilly air through flaring nostrils. Night had fallen, gray and overcast. A light snow fell. A dusting of it would mask scents.

Thinking like a hunter, a wolf—he shook his head to clear his vision of the haze that covered it for a moment. Couldn’t let the wolf take over. Had to stay human. What had Kitty said? *Keep it together*.

His breathing slowed. He straightened his back and felt a little more human.

The lot behind the restaurant was lit by a single, fuzzy orange lamp. Only one car was parked here. Snow coated it, so it had been here a while.

Beyond that lay an interstate wasteland: scrub-covered verges, cracked parking lots and frontage road, ancient gas stations. Cars hummed on the distant freeway, even on Christmas.

A set of flashing lights traveled along the frontage road. David took off at a run after the police car.

In less than half an hour, he reached one of the murder scenes.

He caught a scent—blood, thick on the ground. A hint of rot, meaning guts had been spilled. Not fresh, the slaughter had lain open to air for a while.

Human blood. Somehow, he recognized it.

But did he recognize this place, this situation? Or was it a false memory? Did he recognize the scene from the newscast?

Moving low, almost on all fours, touching the ground with his hands every now and then to keep his balance as he ran, he approached the site. He kept out of sight, hiding among the dried vegetation, banked with crusted snow. *This would be easier on four legs. As a wolf.* He fought to ignore the voice whispering at him, clawing at him. He wanted to keep his awareness.

Police cars blocked off a place where a pickup truck had pulled over along the road. Yellow tape fluttered, marking off almost an acre of land within it. A half dozen people moved around the space, bent over, examining the ground.

David stopped and lay close to the ground, hidden, and studied the area as well as he could. Three body bags on stretchers lay by an ambulance. The pickup truck's doors were open, lights shining around it. Its interior was covered in blood.

Did he even know what he was looking for here? What he hoped to find? He had to admit, he didn't know. He just wanted to see the bodies. See that it had been guns or knives that had done this, spattered all that blood over the truck. Not teeth and claws.

But he could imagine a scenario: driving along the road, this family, or maybe group of friends, saw a huge wolf loping alongside them. Curious, they stopped to watch, because wild wolves weren't found here. Maybe they stepped out to take a picture. And it wasn't a wolf, and he was drawn by the promise of easy prey, of slaughter—

He buried his face in his arm to stop the vision. He choked on a sob, because his mouth was watering. At the same time, he wanted to vomit.

That wasn't a memory. Just an overactive imagination. He couldn't remember. *Couldn't.*

He imagined Kitty's voice telling him to slow his breathing, to hold the panic at bay. To keep it together.

Crawling on his belly, infantry-like, he inched forward to get a better look.

* * *

Kitty expected David to follow her back to the booth after he had settled down. They'd wait for news, hope for the best.

Surely he'd remember *something* if he'd killed someone. Surely. But who could say? For all her bluster, she knew so little about it.

Minutes passed, and he didn't return. Not that she could blame him if he'd decided to avoid her. Maybe stay in the bathroom, hiding from everyone. This whole spending the holidays with people thing left something to be desired.

Finally, she went back to the bathrooms to check. He wasn't in the women's anymore. For the best, probably. She knocked on the door to the men's. "David?" she called, and got no answer. She opened the door a crack, peered in. Empty. So where had he gone?

From the back hallway, the kitchen was visible, all stainless-steel surfaces and stove tops. The single cook on duty leaned on a counter, looking out at the TV. And on the other side of the room was a door to the outside. Her heart thudded, contemplating what he was doing. She'd been stupid, confronting him like that. Now she'd driven him off. Who knew what he would do, an out-of-control werewolf roaming the countryside?

Of course, now it was up to her to clean up the mess. Or at least keep it from getting worse.

Crouching to avoid drawing the cook's attention, she dashed across the kitchen and went through the door, which was already unlocked. As if someone had been this way already. Outside was freezing. But her blood was warm, Wolf running through her, firing her senses. Scent, sound, feel—she searched for his trail by the way the hairs on the back of her neck tingled. She felt the heat of his footsteps on the ground.

Breaking into a jog, she followed his trail, the faint touch of his scent, like a taste in the back of her throat. She let a bit of Wolf bleed into her consciousness. A bit of the hunter, tracking one of her own.

She shouldn't have been surprised to find the trail leading straight toward what was clearly a crime scene of epic proportions. Flashing blue and red flared out over the countryside, turning the darkness into a surreal disco parody. The snow fell heavier now, large flakes burning on her skin. They glittered in the lights. She'd

forgotten her coat, but hardly noticed; she was sweating from the exertion.

Not wanting to get caught, and certainly not wanting to answer questions about why she was out here, she dropped to the ground. She assumed David had done the same, since she couldn't see him silhouetted against the lights. Instead, she saw what must have been dozens of cops milling inside a taped-off area.

And she smelled blood. Great quantities of reeking, rotten blood and bile. People hadn't just died; they'd been shredded. Her human sensibilities gagged. The Wolf merely cataloged the information: several bodies, human, gutted, and they'd been out awhile. Carrion, Wolf thought. Kitty shook the thought away.

Had they been dead long enough for David to be the culprit? Almost, she turned around and went back, because she didn't want to know.

Just a little bit farther, though. If she could smell the bodies, she ought to be able to catch a scent of what had done this to them. Since she couldn't get close, she concentrated on the land around them. If something had killed them here, then that same something had to have fled. The trail might be covered with snow now, but she might find a trace of it.

She smelled David.

Pausing a moment, she tasted it, fearing what it meant. But no, this was fresh. Still warm. The touch of him on the air was more human than wolf. He was in human form. His trail didn't have the reek of a predator who'd just devoured prey.

Ahead, she saw him, a dark figure stretched out on the ground, collecting bits of snow in the wrinkles of his clothes. She was in the perfect position to sneak up on him and pounce. In fact, her hands itched, the claws wanting to come out, Wolf wanting to grab this opportunity.

And wouldn't that be a complete and utter disaster? She refrained, not wanting to give him a heart attack—or a good excuse to turn wolf at this particular moment.

"David," she called in the loudest whisper she could manage, creeping up until she was beside him.

Despite her caution, he flinched and twisted back to look at her. Then he sagged with relief.

"What are you doing here?" he hissed back.

"Following you. Have you found out anything?"

He took a deep breath. "I don't think a werewolf did it. There'd be some trace of it, wouldn't there?"

There would. She'd smelled the aftermath of a werewolf-killed body before, and he was right—if David had done it, they'd be smelling blood, bodies, and *wolf*.

"Yeah, there would," she said.

He slumped and made a sound that was almost a sob. He'd come out here for no other reason than to reassure himself.

Tentative, she touched his shoulder. Leaned close to him in a wolfish gesture of companionship. "It's okay. It's going to be okay. Let's go back now." Back to the warmth, light, virgin eggnog, Jimmy Stewart, and a wonderful life.

"If I didn't do this," David said, "who did? *What* did?"

"That's for the police to find out."

Something seemed to have taken hold of him. Some newfound determination. Like the evidence had given him confidence—proof that he wasn't an out-of-control ravaging monster.

"We ought to be able to find something out," he said. "We can smell the trail. The police can't do that. If we can, shouldn't we help—"

"'With great power comes great responsibility.' Is that what you're thinking?" she said with a smirk.

Looking away, he frowned. "It can't hurt to try."

She wanted to apologize. She shouldn't tease him.

"So," she said. "You feel like a hunt?"

He stared out at the murder scene. He might have had a human form, but crouched there, his gaze focused, body tense, ready to leap forward in an instant, his body language was all wolf. She felt the same stance in her own body.

"Yeah," he said. "I do."

Together, they took off at a jog, keeping clear of the cordoned-off area and the circle of lights that marked it. Prowling out of sight of the police, they found a trail, the barest scent of blood on the air. Probably not so much as a drop was left on the ground for the police to find. But it was there, lingering, fading rapidly because of the falling snow. If they were going to do this, they needed to hurry.

They ranged back and forth along the same half-mile stretch of prairie leading away from the frontage road, looking for the sign they'd discovered: blood on the air, and oil, like the person they were looking for worked in a garage. There was something indefinable—something she as a human being couldn't describe. But the Wolf inside her knew the flavor of the smell. This was a predator they were looking for. A taste of aggression rather than fear, like there'd be with prey. The feeling put her on edge. She was sure, though: The murderer was human.

A few miles from the interstate, another set of police cars gathered around a house at what looked like a junkyard. Acres of wrecked and rusting cars lined up on the land around it, roped in by strings of barbed-wire fencing. The familiar ring of lights and yellow tape bound the house. And the tang of blood and slaughter drenched the air. This scene was more recent than the other.

"What is this?" Kitty whispered. "Is some guy roaming the countryside murdering people he just happens across?"

The thought of a crazed murderer running around out here didn't frighten her; she was a werewolf. Unless his weapons were silver, he couldn't hurt her without really working at it. Even so, this was turning into one of her more harebrained adventures.

"What are we going to do if we find the killer?" David said.

"Call 911?" Then she grumbled, "Ignoring for a moment the fact that I didn't bring my cell phone and I'm betting you don't have one ... we tell the police what?"

"I don't know. I thought you were the one with all the answers."

Ha. Why did everyone think that again? Just because she ran her mouth more often than not was no reason to actually put any *faith* in her.

She had no desire to get closer to this murder scene, and the killer's trail was fading.

"Let's go," she said, and took off at a jog. After a moment's hesitation, David followed her.

It made her wonder, just for a moment, what it would be like to have a pack again. The thought made her lonely, so she shook it away. The thing now was to find this killer. Figure out a way to throw him at the cops. Or to stop him, if it came to that.

The guy was on foot. If he had left footprints, the falling snow covered them. They tracked by scent alone, but the smell of human blood was strong. Not exactly subtle. Nothing about these murders was subtle. Kitty could tell that much by the police response, without even seeing the bodies. She didn't have to be a trained profiler to tell these were unplanned. He was lashing out, haphazard.

David must have been thinking along the same lines. Briskly, they walked side by side, following the trail that the police hadn't found yet. "He's racking up a body count, isn't he? That's what this is about. Whoever he is, he's gone postal."

"Looks that way," Kitty said.

"We're going to have to kill him if we find him, aren't we?" David said.

"No." She shook her head. "I don't want to get in the habit of killing people. Even if they are bad guys. I don't think you want to get into that habit either."

He pursed his lips and nodded.

When they spotted another house up ahead, lit by the yellow circle of a lamp by the door, Kitty's stomach sank. They'd found his next target.

It wasn't really a house, but a weather-beaten single-wide mobile home, white aluminum siding rusting at the edges, sitting by itself at the end of a long dirt road. The minimum of what could be called a homestead. But it had a fenced-in yard with spinning plastic sunflowers sticking out of the snow, and a satellite dish attached to the roof, which was outlined in colored holiday lights. Somebody loved this place and called it home, and the killer had headed right for it.

She tugged on David's arm and broke into a run. Dodging the fence, they went to the front door. The place seemed peaceful. Soft, shaded light shone through the fogged windows. Faintly, the sound of Christmas carols played on a radio, muted. Maybe nothing was wrong. Maybe they'd made a mistake. They hesitated at the base of a trio of steps leading to the front door. Their breaths, coming fast after the effort of running, steamed in the chill air. David glanced at her.

"What do we do?" he whispered.

"We knock on the front door," she said, shrugging. "If nothing's wrong, we can sing 'Jingle Bells.'"

He actually chuckled. The boy was coming around.

She mounted the steps first, raised a fist to knock on the door—and saw that it already stood open a crack. *Shit.*

Then she thought, *What the hell*, and pushed open the door all the way.

Her nose flared with the scent of blood at the same time she saw the spray across the linoleum floor of the entryway before her.

Wolf's senses sprang to the fore, the instinct to Change and defend herself ripping through her gut. She swallowed back bile and forced that feeling down, told herself to keep it together, stay human, keep that beast locked away. Her gut clenched, but she didn't shift.

Still, she looked over the scene with a hunter's gaze, and a growl burred in her throat.

Standing over his prey, the man glanced at Kitty with surprise. He was tall and thin—unnaturally thin, like he hadn't eaten well in some time. His clothes hung oddly on him. He wore a green canvas jacket, white T-shirt, threadbare jeans. All shone wet with blood. He was covered with red, presumably from his previous two stops. She could smell violence on him, illness, like an animal that had gone out of control, that no longer worked by instinct, but by madness, striking out at everything. His pale eyes gleamed with it. His ear-length hair was matted, uncombed, and an uneven beard grew around his slack mouth. His whole body was rigid.

He loomed over two people, a middle-aged man and woman, husband and wife probably, who lay in the middle of what passed for a living room—a plush sofa shoved up against one wall and a large TV in the opposite corner. They were both a little worn out and overweight, both wearing jeans and T-shirts—they matched the trailer, Kitty thought absently. They were trussed up like a holiday meal. That was the only way Kitty could think of it. Each had wrists and ankles bound fast in front of them with thin twine. Both were gagged with strips of cloth, so tightly their teeth were bared, their lips stretched back in grotesque smiles. Their eyes glared large and white with fear. Bloody marks shone on their heads, as if the killer had subdued them by hitting them with something. But they were alive, trembling, pressing themselves away from the killer even while bound.

He'd started with her, slashing her arms, spilling blood everywhere. He held an eight-inch-long serrated knife, dull-looking, something that might rip like the teeth of an animal. It dripped blood onto the floor.

The killer regarded Kitty and David.

Wolf, the voice of wild instinct, spoke to Kitty: *Can't show fear, can't show terror, then he'll know he's stronger and he'll attack, he'll kill. We must be stronger, we must dominate, we are alpha here.*

Wolf was right. Kitty wanted to scream, but she didn't. Instead, she looked him in the eye. Glared. Bared her teeth a little. He was in the wrong here. He must be made to relent—to show his belly. Cow him before they had to fight it out.

Beside her, David was doing the same. His fingers were curled, stiff, as if showing claws. For a moment, she worried. Much more of this, and he'd shift. Hell, they both might. And maybe that wouldn't be so bad—no way could this guy escape from a couple of werewolves with full-on claws and teeth.

The killer took a step back. He sensed something, obviously. The aggression, the challenge. The fact that these were a couple of monsters standing in front of him, no matter how harmless they might look. But he didn't know how to read the signs. He didn't know how to respond. A wolf would either return the challenge or back down—slumped shoulders, lowered gaze. Make himself small and helpless before them, to show that they were stronger.

This guy twitched, feet shifting in place. His grip tightened and retightened around the handle of the knife. His gaze shifted between them, the door, his captives, the knife in his hand, and back. He didn't know where to look, where to go, what to do. His eyes were wide, shocky, and his lips trembled.

Then he asked a strange question.

"What are you?"

I'm your worst nightmare, Kitty wanted to mutter in a bad accent. But she didn't. She wondered what he saw in them, though—two people with wolves staring out of their eyes, tense and glaring like they were ready to rip his throat out. The guy ought to be scared.

She had to swallow a couple of times before she could speak instead of growl.

"You're not going to do this anymore. You're not going to get away with what you've already done."

After staring at her for a moment, he bit his lip and made a noise that almost sounded like a giggle.

What had she thought he would do, put the knife down and his hands up and wait for the cops to get here?

He stepped toward her, and Kitty braced to defend herself—kicking and scratching his eyes out if she had to. She wasn't worried about the knife. It was stainless steel, not silver. He'd have to just about cut her head off before it would do real damage.

Not that it wouldn't hurt a whole lot in the meantime.

David moved to intercept him. His shoulders were bunched up, like hackles raised, and his glare seemed to bore through the killer. In response, the man stumbled back, clutching the knife with both hands and pointing it defensively. The knife was shaking, just a little.

Hell. Maybe she could just talk him out of it.

"You're going to put the knife down now," Kitty said, her voice low, rough. "You're not going to kill anyone else. We won't let you."

Then, unbelievably, he started crying. Didn't make a sound, but tears spilled from his eyes. Kitty thought, *Something drove him to this*. Something pushed him over the edge and he couldn't cope, and he was psychotic enough to begin with that he did this. This was something else that could happen when you didn't have a place to go home to at Christmas.

Wolf didn't have an ounce of sympathy for a predator who slaughtered for no reason, who didn't recognize territory, who didn't obey the rules. Wolf could spot the signs and see what was happening right before the killer tensed and raised his knife to attack. Shouting, he made a mad plunge for the door, ready to slash his way past her and David.

She'd have let him go. They could call in an anonymous tip, let the cops go after him. They'd saved these people—wasn't that enough?

But David stopped him.

She thought he was shifting, that he'd lost it and his predator had burst forth to meet this human predator in challenge. The killer lunged forward, ready to stab down and cut his way through to the door.

David ducked and tackled him. Planted his shoulder under the guy's ribs and shoved. Werewolves were stronger than people. David threw more power into the move than appeared possible. The killer swung sideways and banged into the flimsy plywood wall dividing the living room from the kitchen.

David didn't shape-shift. His wolf hadn't taken over. He had used the wolf's power and managed to stay in control, though he was breathing hard, and his teeth were bared.

He didn't let the killer recover. Pouncing, he pinned the guy to the floor, tossed the knife away, and leaned a rigid hand on his neck, pressing down with all his weight. The killer sputtered, gasping for air, thrashing, but he couldn't escape David's strength.

So maybe he wasn't entirely in control of himself.

"David," Kitty said. David flinched, startled, and glared at her, something amber and animal lurking in his eyes. He was *barely* under control. "Keep it together. You don't have to kill. Just keep it together."

"Then what do we do?" His voice was a growl.

"We'll leave him for the cops."

Kitty waited until he nodded, until his muscles relaxed, until he stopped looking like a wolf in human skin,

before she knelt by the victims. But when she approached them, they screamed around their gags.

“No, no, I’m not going to hurt you,” Kitty murmured. Once again, she wondered what she and David looked like from the outside. Were their eyes glowing or something? Maybe they were. Her senses were on a trip wire.

She moved slowly, and the husband let her work off the gag and the cords on his wrists. “Do you have rope or duct tape or something?” she asked.

He nodded quickly. “Kitchen. By the sink.” Then, just like the killer had, he asked, “What are you?”

That question again. And those wide, fearful eyes.

“Doesn’t matter,” she said. She went to the kitchen and found a length of clothesline in the drawer by the sink.

Kitty helped David tie up the killer. They probably tied him much tighter than he needed to be. But she didn’t want to take chances.

“I don’t want to have to answer questions from the cops,” David said.

“That’s okay,” Kitty said. “I don’t think we should stick around.” She turned to the couple, who were now free of their cords. “Call 911. Get help.”

“Thank you,” the man said breathlessly. “Thank you, thank you—”

“Thank us by not telling the cops about us. Okay? The guy got sloppy. You did this yourselves. Okay?”

Both of them nodded frantically. They kept looking at the bound killer like they expected him to attack. But he lay limp, staring unblinkingly at nothing. He whined with every breath. Like a hurt wolf.

In a moment, the man was talking on the phone, and Kitty and David stood by the door. She had a weird urge to say “Merry Christmas” or something before they left. The woman was looking back at her, cradling her torn and bloody arms in her lap, gasping for breath. But smiling. Just a little.

Kitty smiled back, then pulled David out the door with her.

They trudged back to town, led by the sounds of cars on the freeway and the faint glow of lights through the misty air. Snow was falling picturesquely. Her feet, and the rest of her, were soaking wet. David was using the snow to wash blood off his hands.

He looked at her. “Why the hell are you smiling?”

Kitty was grinning so hard she thought her face would break.

“Why am I smiling? Because we totally saved those people. We’re werewolf superheroes! We’re Batman and Robin! That’s so awesome!”

Then again, that might have been the adrenaline talking.

* * *

David wanted to howl at the night sky in joy and triumph. He’d almost shifted. He’d almost gone over the edge. Attacking that guy had come instinctively. It had been like hunting. But he came back from the edge. With Kitty’s help, he’d pulled himself back and stayed human. And that felt powerful.

The glaring yellow sign of the Waffle House shone like a beacon over the snow-covered prairie. Like the Star of Bethlehem over the manger. David felt a surge of relief when he and Kitty came back in sight of it. Civilization. A roof and hot coffee. Glorious.

No telling how much time had passed since they’d left. They crept in through the still unlocked kitchen door.

The cook was gone. Both of them were soaking wet from running in the snow. At least it made the blood he’d gotten on him less noticeable. Almost, he could think about the blood without wanting to turn wolf.

Kitty rubbed her arms and shook out her shirt, squeezing water out of the hem. “Not the smartest thing I’ve done recently,” she muttered. “The one time I didn’t bring a change of clothes...”

David resisted an urge to reach out and hug her. From affection. From happiness. How long had it been since he’d been happy? Despite the adventure, the running, tracking the killer, and the violence of what he’d witnessed, the urge to turn wolf had faded, a whisper rather than overwhelming thunder. He’d taken a step toward asserting his dominance over that part of his being. The world looked brighter because of that.

Jane, the waitress, came in. “There you are. I thought maybe you’d ducked out on me, but your coat and bag are still here, but you weren’t in the bathroom, and I was starting to worry...” She narrowed her gaze. “What

are you two doing back here?"

David opened his mouth but couldn't think of what to say. It was Kitty who announced, cheerfully, "Oh, you know. Looking for mistletoe."

He blushed, which must have lent some truth to her excuse, because Jane quirked a smile and left again.

"Sorry," Kitty said. "But people tend not to ask more questions if you tell them you've been fooling around."

He wanted to burst out laughing. "Does this sort of thing happen to you a lot?"

"You'd be surprised."

He had a feeling he wouldn't.

Out front, they returned to their booth. Other customers glanced at them, but no one seemed unduly concerned. The TV was still tuned to local news. The same reporter stood by what looked like the same snowy roadside, speaking grimly at the camera. Similar text scrolled along the bottom listing details: five murders and two attempted murders at three different locations. But instead of "serial killer on the loose," the text now read, "serial killer caught."

Then David listened. "Police apprehended the suspected murderer just a little while ago. He appears to have been overpowered by his latest would-be victims, both of whom were injured in the encounter and have been taken to a local hospital. The police have made a statement that they cannot speculate on the exact series of events, and the lone survivors of these horrific events are not talking to reporters."

Maybe they were safe. The witnesses wouldn't remember them. No one would come looking for them. Just a couple more monsters in the night.

He and Kitty got refills on their coffee and made a little toast. "To Christmas," Kitty said. He just smiled.

He'd faced down a killer. Captured a killer, and kept his own killer nature locked inside him. Now that he knew he could do it, he wondered if it would become easier. Wondered if maybe he could go home again. He thought he knew what Kitty would say if he mentioned it to her: He'd never know until he tried.

Maybe it wasn't too late to go home for the holidays.

"Thank you," he said to Kitty.

She glanced away from the TV. "For what?"

"For helping me. For teaching me. For making my day a little more interesting. For giving me hope."

She shrugged and gave a surprisingly shy smile. "I didn't do much but get in trouble. As usual."

"Well, thank you anyway. I think I'm going to go back home. See if I can't get my old job back. See if I can't cope with this a little better. I think I can do that now."

"Really?"

He shrugged. "I'd like to try. Not much future for me waking up naked in the woods every couple of days."

"Not unless you're in an industry with a lot of X's in the job description." He had to laugh. "Just remember to breathe slowly," she said.

"Yeah." He started to get up.

"You're going right now?"

"I'm going to make some calls." He gestured to the front door and the pay phone outside.

"Do you need money or something? For the phone."

"I'll call collect. This is the one night a year I know my folks will be home. It's ... it's been a while since I've called. They'll want to hear from me. I can get some money wired, then catch a bus for home."

He really was anxious to get going. Anxious to test himself. She seemed put out. She really wanted to help, and it heartened him that people like that were still out there.

"Here, take this." She dug in her bag and pulled out something, which she handed to him. A business card.

"That has all my info on it. Let me know if you need anything."

"Thanks."

"Good luck." Smiling, she watched him leave.

He was at the pay phone before he took a good look at the card. It was for a radio station: KNOB. Her name: Kitty Norville. And a line: "Host of *The Midnight Hour*, *The Wild Side of Talk Radio*." She hosted a talk radio show. He should have guessed.

He hadn't talked to his parents in months. Not since he'd run away. He'd done it to protect them, but now, dialing the operator, he found himself tearing up. He couldn't wait to talk to them. He heard the operator ask if they'd accept the charges. Gave him his name, and he heard his mother respond, "Yes, yes of course, Oh my God..."

He said, his voice cracking, "Hi, Mom?"

* * *

Thankfully, Jane turned the news off when the reporter started repeating herself. The movie was long over. The carols were back, all the ones Kitty knew by heart. Jane must have had the same compilation album that her parents played when she was growing up. Funny, how it wouldn't be Christmas without them.

One of her favorite tunes came on, a solemn French carol. A choir sang the lyrics, which she had never paid much attention to because she didn't speak much French. But she knew the title: "*Il Est Né le Divin Enfant.*" *Il Est Né.* He is born.

She dug in her bag and found her cell phone. Dialed a number, even though it was way too late. But when the answer came, Kitty heard party noises in the background—her parents, her sister, her niece and nephew, laughter, more carols—so it was all right.

She said, "Hi, Mom?"

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