

1040

Time was running out. A pale golden glow in the eastern sky told him that the full moon would soon edge above the horizon.

Derek Talbot ground his teeth in rage. He felt as if he was suffocating; the air was closing in on him like a clenching fist, crushing him, making it difficult to breathe. His skin was stretched taut, and felt itchy and stubbly from head to toe. His head and his chest pounded, thumping like a drum to the beat of his heart. All too soon he would be forced to Change.

He was twenty five miles away from Winslow Junction, twenty five miles away from Liz.

Would that be far enough away to save her?

Oh, God -- Liz!

A road sign flashed by.

BELMONT

POP. 2500 www.nobelwer.com

The garish neon of a roadside hotel stabbed through the gathering gloom in the near distance. Wouldn't have been his first choice, but it would have to do. Any port in a storm. It did have the virtue of backing up into a dense forest. He whipped the BMW into the parking lot.

The Drake Motel. Talbot frowned. To call this place "seedy" was a compliment. The bright pink paint was peeling, and several windows were cracked and starred. He felt his lips twitch back over his teeth in a snarl, and he remembered why he had come.

To save Liz.

He grabbed his bag and jumped from the car. He was going to book a room, whether there were any vacancies or not. Just let anyone try to stop him! He burst into the office, startling a pimply-faced youth with greasy black hair, clad in jeans and an Iron Maiden tee shirt.

"Need a room," he growled.

The kid got up slowly and stretched.

"Sometime today!" Talbot roared.

The clerk jumped. He hustled over to the battered counter and quickly started filling out a ticket. "Name, sir?" he quavered. www.W.nobelwer.com

"Give me that!" Talbot irritably snatched away the paper and quickly scribbled the billing information on the form and signed it. Then he whipped out a Visa to pay for two days' lodging. He was Mr. B. C. Redmond of Bellingham, Washington.

Fortunately the motel had a decent VeriSign system, and his card was quickly approved.

"Room 103, down on the..."

Talbot ripped the key from the clerk's hand and stalked wordlessly from the office.

"Thank you, Mr. Redmond," the kid rasped. "We have a continental breakfast at..."

The door slammed, and the clerk was alone in the room.

"Prick!" he grumbled. Then he repressed a shudder. Something weird about that guy.

His eyes were yellow - and they seemed to glow.

Derek Talbot furiously stripped naked as he pulled the door to his cabin closed behind him. He tossed his clothes on the bed, noticing that the window opened outward and was wide enough to accommodate him. He wormed his way through the gap and eased the window frame shut.

He made it to the crest of the hill behind the motel before the first wrenching stab of agony clawed at his insides. He went to his knees, choking off a scream. His muscles rippled and thickened as bones stretched and fur covered his body. He glanced up, the skin around his eyes netted with pain.

The full moon floated just above the horizon, a glowing orange skull grinning stiffly in the twilight.

"Liz!"

His cry was thick with despair. Derek Talbot's human self was slipping away, and he said a quick, desperate prayer for her as the Wolf exultantly claimed control of his being. The creature went down on all fours, excited by the raw power that throbbed, violently and impatiently, through his transformed body. He yearned to hunt something warm and soft. His keen nose sifted the air.

Then he caught a scent. Prey -- and not very far from here!

The beast tossed back his head and loosed a bloodcurdling howl. Then he crashed off through the underbrush, his bloodlust driving him onward.

It was so peaceful up here.

The forest was silent, except for the hooting of an owl and the sigh of pine needles whispering in the breeze.

Helen Noble gathered a bouquet of wildflowers by the bright moonlight. She and Bob had come here to the Belmont Nature Preserve for their honeymoon, and had returned many times to this very campsite over the years. It was their special place.

They were here now to celebrate what would be their thirty-second -- and last -- anniversary.

Her eyes misted over with tears as she gazed down the slope to the campsite where Bob threw a couple of logs on the fire. She could not accept that he had only six months to live. He looked so healthy and fit. Lung cancer -- and he had never smoked a cigarette in his life!

But his parents had both been heavy smokers, and the second-hand smoke of their habit had doomed her husband.

She studied him in the moonlight. At 54, he was still handsome and virile. His jet black hair had turned iron gray, and he had a bit of a paunch, but he could still make her feel "frisky" -- their pet term for being aroused. For herself, she had held up fairly well, too. She had just turned fifty, and was still pretty. There were flecks of silver in her blonde hair, and she was a little bit thicker through the middle, but in the properly-tailored outfit, she could still turn heads.

In another four years he could have taken early retirement. They had been bursting with plans - cruises, trips, all kinds of things to do. They would still be young enough to enjoy their leisure time.

All that had changed when they found the spot on Bob's right lung.

Tonight they would make love in their little tent, just as they had thirty-two years ago. It would be bittersweet -- it was always bittersweet now, because each time could be the last. There was no telling when his energy would begin to flag, when he would no longer be able to make love to her.

Suddenly, the owl stopped hooting.

Something moved, rustling the bushes behind her - something big.

Bob's eyes widened in horror, and he frantically grabbed his shotgun.

"Helen -- get down! NOW!"

She knew him too well to question him. She dropped to the ground as the explosion of the powerful weapon rocked the quiet forest. Pellets sang over the top of her, and the deafening roar of a huge animal in pain shattered the air. A bear?

Helen glanced up and screamed in terror.

It was an apparition from hell, seven feet tall and thickly muscled, covered with shaggy brown fur. It stood upright like a man, but the massive head was the head of a snarling wolf. Spatters of bright red blood peppered its shoulder where the pellets had found their mark.

Jesus -- what was it?

Bob was sprinting toward her now, yelling, pumping the semi automatic Browning on the run. The creature howled and fled as her husband fired another blast in its direction.

"Are you all right?" he asked anxiously as Helen got to her feet.

"I'm fine," she answered. "What was that? Bigfoot? It looked like some kind of a wolf thing! God, did you see that face? Horrible!"

"Don't know what it is, and I don't want to know!" Bob pumped another shell into the chamber.

"We'd better break camp," Helen suggested.

He shook his head. "Screw the camp! We're getting out of here now and going to the police. We'll come back for our gear in the morning -- with the National Guard!"

He took her by the hand and hustled her down the hill to the Land Rover. They hopped in and slammed and locked the doors behind them. Bob started up the vehicle and tore down the trail until he came to the main road. They breathed a sigh of relief.

Bob suddenly chuckled.

"What?" Helen asked, a smile quirking the corners of her mouth.

"When I said we needed to put a little more excitement into our marriage, that's not exactly what I had in mind!"

She laughed, and leaned over to rest her head on his shoulder. "I love you, honey," she whispered.

'And I am so going to miss you,' she thought.

A silent tear tracked down her cheek. www.nobelwer.com

His shoulder burned like fire.

The werewolf seethed with rage and pent-up frustration as he crouched on the huge, flat boulder overlooking the main road. The wound wasn't that bad, but a hit at close range could have disabled him for a while. At the very least, the injury would force him to revert to his human form. He couldn't take that chance.

He watched as his wounded skin regenerated and healed. The flesh undulated, and, one by one, the shotgun pellets popped out from beneath his skin, rejected by the new tissues. The tiny lead bb's clattered on the rock.

Guns - he'd had enough of guns today to last him a lifetime!

His stomach rumbled. The supercharged metabolism of the Wolf was burning up his last reserves of energy. He would have to feed, and soon. He toyed with the idea of descending the hill and taking

out the greasy hotel clerk, but he decided he wasn't that desperate - yet.

The wind shifted, and he flashed a terrible, toothy grin.

The girl limped painfully up the road, cursing and hoping on one foot from time to time. The werewolf slid stealthily off the rock and loped down the hillside toward the road. She would be easy prey, and her skimpy clothing provided no hiding place for a gun. Soon both of his appetites would be sated.

For a while.