

Wolves at the Shore

By Thomas James

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## ONE

Checking the clock for the fifth time in the past fifteen minutes, Sheila's blank gaze wandered about taking in the few customers in the Terminus Bar. Bright neon lights painted rainbow hues across the bar as she ran a damp rag across the pitted wood, bringing a false sheen to the aged surface. Muted conversation and sporadic laughter floated from the back tables, mixing with the low volume of the plasma flat screen. Her attention split between her work and listening for any customer request, Sheila only half listened to the current news broadcast.

". . . authorities have very little to go on. This makes the second Brookdale University student to go missing this year. A spokesman for the university has..."

After another check of the clock (10:35), Sheila shook her head, tuning out the news report and finished wiping the bar. Rinsing the bar rag and hanging it up to dry, she glanced up as the main door squealed open, announcing the departure of a patron. Well there's one down Sheila thought and then sighed when she spied the crumpled dollar bill next to an empty beer bottle. When summer ends, so do the decent tips. Gathering up the items, tossing the spent bottle into the empties bucket and the single into a tip jar, Sheila sighed again at the mostly empty tip container. Bartending had its benefits, good tips (sometimes), flexible hours (mostly) and meeting new people but she had bigger goals in life. Once I get my degree my life will change, she thought.

The sounds of scraping chairs and a burst of feminine laughter indicated that the young couples, seated at one of the back tables, made ready to leave. As the quartet passed her, Sheila said, "Good night guys."

"Night Sheila," they answered.

Taking up the bar rag once again, Sheila headed to the back tables to clear away the empty mugs, eyeing the lone remaining

patron. Sheila had noticed him for the first time about two weeks ago. He continued coming in every night since but other than ordering a beer; he did not say a word to anyone. She could not put her finger on it, but something about the man gave Sheila chills, as if he emanated an aura of danger.

Suppressing the idea of going the long way around, Sheila passed directly behind the bar patron, although she took extra care not to tread on his full-length, black, leather coat, draped haphazardly across the chair back.

Picking the two empty mugs off the table, Sheila smiled at the five-dollar bill left by the departed couple. Shoving the money into her jeans right front pocket, Sheila wiped down the table and chairs, placing the chairs upside down on the tables. Turning, Sheila saw her lone customer perusing the jukebox song list, something he normally did not do. The first few chords of a soft rock song filled the air, which Sheila recognized instantly and felt a small tug at her heart. Open Arms by Journey, her mom's favorite song. Was her favorite Sheila silently reminded herself. Heading back to the bar slightly misty-eyed, she began to re-evaluate her assessment of the silent customer. I wouldn't have pegged him as the rock ballad type.

Behind the bar once more, listening to the soft music filling the room, Sheila washed and rinsed the mugs, setting them on the stack and went through the ritual of bar rag maintenance: 10:45. Sheila could not stop an additional sigh. Wiping her forehead with the back of her hand, Sheila picked up the remote, glancing briefly at the screen and shut off the TV, cutting off the local weather report.

The main door squealed open, admitting a chill breeze and a single person. The newcomer moved with an easy grace, the bar's neon lights shining on his bare, muscular arms. Guess he likes the cold Sheila thought. Watching the man approach, Sheila felt butterflies fluttering around in her stomach. Absently, Sheila brushed a loose curl away from her face and then chided herself for acting like a high school girl worrying about how she looked in front of a hot guy.

Stepping up to the bar, the man offered a wolfish smile and Sheila felt the butterflies morph into bats. It took a second for Sheila to find her voice. "Can I get you something," she asked, hoping he could not detect the slight tremor in her voice.

"Marlboros," the man replied, his voice a husky growl.

The stomach bats threatened to fly up her throat. Sheila pointed to the cigarette machine near the side exit. The newcomer thanked Sheila and went to make his purchase.

Very sexy Sheila thought, her gaze following his swagger. Sheila's gaze lingered on the newcomer, admiring the snug fit of his jeans until movement to her right drew Sheila from her musings. The silent customer had returned to his seat, draining the last of his beer, his eyes never leaving the newcomer. Looking from one man to the next, Sheila frowned as the newcomer, having made his selection nodded to Sheila's customer and left via the side exit.

Watching this exchange, Sheila wondered if the two men knew each other. While she thought over this idea, her silent patron threw money on the bar and donning his coat left without a word, pointedly ignoring Sheila's call of good night.

"Alone at last," Sheila said to the now empty bar, the last chords of Open Arms fading into the night. As she locked first the main door and then the side exit, Sheila could not help but think about the silent exchange. Putting the matter aside Sheila swept up the tip (another five) and jamming it into her pocket as she passed. Filling a bucket with soapy water, Sheila gave a last heavy sigh and set about cleaning the bar.

With midnight fast approaching, Sheila exited the Terminus Bar. Overhead, clouds drifted across a full moon as a cold damp breeze snatched at her thin woolen jacket. Looks like rain, guess I should have watched the weather report after all, Sheila thought, gazing up at the nighttime sky. Hugging her arms to her chest, Sheila headed home; her soft-soled shoes scuffing the ground, Sheila quickened her pace, her steps leading her towards the Hudson Bike Path.

Sheila paused at the entrance; using the path would save her 20 minutes of walking in the cold damp weather. She usually strolled along the path to and from work, but of course, walking along a day lit path and walking along a dark deserted path were entirely different situations. The breeze stiffened and Sheila felt a raindrop brush her cheek. After a moment's indecision, a tired and disgusted Sheila Bates turned onto the trail, opting for speed over security and a soaking.

A few yards along the poorly lit gravel path, Sheila halted, as a slight rustling sound reached her ears. Shivers ran along her spine, causing her skin to pebble in the cool night air. Scanning the area, Sheila thought that maybe returning to the path entrance and the safety of the streetlights beyond was not such a bad idea after all. "I should have taken the car," she muttered. Yeah, because gas is so cheap these days she

sarcastically thought. Around her the tree branches swayed and bent in the autumn breeze, casting dancing shadows on the leaf-strewn ground. When the sound did not recur, Sheila drew a calming breath, exhaled and continued on her way, explaining the noise away as tiredness, tension and the wind. She vainly tried to suppress thoughts of the missing college students but had little success.

Halfway down the path a light rain began to fall, when the rustling noise sounded again, louder and closer. Fighting against her rising panic, Sheila's eyes darted about in an attempt to locate the source of the disturbance. A cutting night breeze pressed against the nervous bartender, bringing with it the cloying scent of musk and decay. Gagging slightly, Sheila raised a hand to cover her mouth and nose. The scattering of gravel behind her attracted Sheila's attention. Without slowing her steps, the jittery bartender glanced over her shoulder spotting a dark, silent figure appearing on the gravel path. The ominous figure followed, matching Sheila's pace. Sparing another backward glance, Sheila caught a glimpse of a smiling face as its owner stepped briefly through a dimly lit area. Sheila's breath caught in her throat. She would have recognized that smile anywhere, the smile that had only an hour ago made her feel like a schoolgirl. Sheila did not feel like a schoolgirl



now, she only felt fear. After several steps, her nerves already screaming with tension, Sheila gave into her fear and broke into a full out run. The dark figure bolted after her, running in a slight crouch still matching her pace, creating a bizarre sort of game.

Blocked in by trees and withered thorny shrubs on either side of the path, Sheila raced away from the predator, conscious of the fact that she was effectively secluded and there would be no help nearby. A scream built up inside Sheila, but her throat constricted with terror, shutting off any sound. Running as fast as she could, Sheila risked another glance over her shoulder. Instinctively, she knew that he could overtake her at any time. Her concentration on the pursuer, Sheila never saw the second figure step into her path.

At 5'-5" and 110 pounds, Sheila never stood a chance as she slammed into the 6' human wall. Sheila bounced off the unmoving figure and landed heavily on the hard, unforgiving ground, air exploding from her overworked lungs. Stunned, Sheila could only stare up helplessly, her eyes misting.

Through tear-blurred vision, Sheila could only make out one distinctive feature of this new threat striding towards her...a full-length leather coat. Sheila cringed, tears streaming down

her fear stricken face. "Please," she mumbled, raising a hand in a futile gesture of self-defense.

The six-foot, silent figure took another step, this one over Sheila's prone form, his ankle-length coat dragging across her splayed legs. Surprised, Sheila looked on as the leather-coated figure broke into a run and crashed into her pursuer. Sheila knew that she should flee or scream for help, but her fear immobilized her.

The two combatants grappled back and forth, struggling for dominance. If not for the leather coat, Sheila did not think that she could tell the men apart. The leather wearer gripped his opponent under the arm and rolling his hips, tossed the pursuer onto the ground. The stalker grunted upon impact, kicking out and sweeping the legs from beneath his opponent. Sheila sat stunned as the sprawling figures bounced upright.

Two quick jabs by the man in leather connected with the shadowy figure, snapping back the head. The smile gone from his face, Sheila's pursuer launched a wild roundhouse punch that caught nothing but air as the leather wearer ducked low. Sheila could hear bones crunching as a rising uppercut by the leather-coated individual rocked the dark form back on its heels, eliciting a yell of pain and rage. The dark form stumbled back a step but recovered quickly, lashing out and raking his attacker

across the chest, tearing through cloth and flesh. The stranger, gritting his teeth clasped his wounded chest, and dropped to one knee, groping for a fallen tree branch. Rising quickly, he swung the makeshift weapon, crashing it onto the upraised arm of the shadowy figure. The snapping wood, sounding like a gunshot echoed into the night, followed by a howl of outrage. Sheila's attacker advanced, appearing distorted to the terrified bartender.

Sheila gasped; the shadowy figure began to change, growing taller and bulkier. A tremendous backhand by the morphing figure staggered Sheila's savior, his blood spraying through the air like liquid night and sending him sprawling on the ground. Overhead lightning flashed and briefly illuminated the combatants. The horrified bartender rose to her knees, still unable to tear her eyes away from her pursuer, whose facial features continued to morph, becoming more lupine in nature. Her first thought cried out, he's not human! Frantically her mind raced, trying to place the creature into a category; finally, it came to her: Werewolf! Terrified beyond normal boundaries, Sheila finally screamed. Her pursuer, more beast than man, turned at the unexpected scream, and gave a howl in return, counter pointed by the rumbling thunder and mounting rain.

The brief distraction allowed Sheila's rescuer time to recover. The man launched a front kick at the beast's exposed midsection. Caught off-guard by the blow, the beast doubled over, roaring with rage. Before Sheila's rescuer could press the advantage, the man-beast leaped forward and seized its opponent by the throat, its clawed hands squeezing tightly. Lightning continued to streak across the nighttime sky as the rain pounded the trio. Powerful arms lifted the man off the ground, his six-foot frame dangling in the air like a rag doll, his leather coat flapping in the wind. The sight of such a large man hanging helplessly aloft by this man-beast shocked Sheila into silence. The inhuman creature continued to grow, coarse hair erupting along its arms and exposed flesh, fangs bursting from its elongated jaw.

Corded muscles flexed as the beast strangled the man. Suspended almost a foot off the ground, the struggling figure jammed his thumbs into the beast's eyes. The were-beast's clawed hands tightened further, while the suspended man pressed harder into the eye sockets. Finally, howling in pain, the beast tossed the man aside like so much refuse. Gasping for breath and attempting to rise but weakened from the attack, the leather-coated man collapsed, seemingly unconscious. The beast screamed in triumphant rage, its body contorting and growing, its

features becoming more wolfish. Sounds of snapping bones and shredding cloth echoed in Sheila's ears, as still another scream ripped from her lungs.

The beast swung its massive head towards its original target, its skin pulsating and changing. A large forked tongue dripping saliva snaked out between sharp, two-inch fangs. Clawed hands reached into its chest and tore away the last remains of human flesh. The werewolf dropped to all fours, now in full wolf form. Disregarding its stunned adversary, the wolf stalked towards the defenseless woman. Baleful yellow-green eyes, bored into the wide, hazel, eyes of a terrified Sheila Bates. Mesmerized by the luminous orbs of the werewolf, Sheila could only watch the slow approach of her death.

Two strides from its potential victim, the wolf's 200 plus-pound frame poised to rend the life from Sheila, when its forgotten rival rammed his shoulder into its side, the collision sending the unprepared wolf rolling across the gravel path. A grimace of pain registered on the stranger's face, his breathing coming hard and quick. Large paws, ending in razor sharp claws, scabbled for purchase on the rain-slicked path, spraying a shower of gravel. Quickly the beast twisted to confront its hated enemy. The two adversaries squared off; only with one of their deaths would end this fight.

Breathing heavily, blood dripping down his rugged face, the leather-coated man positioned himself between beauty and beast, awaiting the next attack. His ice-blue eyes tracking the werewolf's every move, the rescuer gently extracted a slim object from his left coat pocket: two rings joined by a length of fine wire.

With a roar of challenge and hate, the werewolf leapt for the throat of its human enemy. The rescuer dropped into a somersault, rolling beneath the airborne beast. Bounding to his feet, the human turned as the werewolf landed on all fours, inches away from Sheila.

Another scream erupted from the woman, temporarily distracting the beast. The rescuer threw himself onto the werewolf's back, wrapping his arms around the throat of the beast. Instinctively, the creature attempted to dislodge the attacker, tossing its massive head in an attempt to bite the human. Gripping the object with both hands, the man began pulling the garrote taut about the throat of the beast. Aghast, Sheila stared as the wire cut into the flesh of the werewolf. The rescuer threw back his body, retaining a death-grip on the garrote. Blood spattered the ground. The werewolf struggled frantically against the wire, unwittingly speeding up its demise.

Bracing a knee on the beast's spine and with a herculean effort, the man jerked the garrote violently, decapitating the creature. The coppery smell of blood flooded the area, washing over Sheila, assaulting her senses. Sheila watched as the werewolf head fell to the earth, roll-bounced away and at last settled beneath a withered shrub. Unable to help herself, she turned and became noisily sick. Rocking back and forth, nerves nearly frayed beyond sanity, Sheila mumbled repeatedly, "This isn't real, werewolves don't exist. This isn't real, werewolves don't exist."

"They're real, and you had better get used to it."

Sheila jumped at the sound of the raspy voice. Wiping the back of her hand across her mouth, Sheila turned to regard her rescuer and nearly fainted at the sight of a naked, headless corpse. In death, the werewolf reverted to its human form. Wrapping her arms tightly around herself, Sheila stood in the rain, looking lost and shaken. Unsure what to say, she waited patiently, looking on as the man searched through the remains of the tattered clothing. From a torn jeans pocket, the stranger withdrew a flat circular disk, which he secreted away. Sheila could not stay silent as he rolled the corpse over.

"Looking for something?"

"Yeah, his pack marking," he said pointing to an intricate tattoo on the right shoulder. "Lycaonis. You're lucky, they usually hunt in pairs."

Sheila noted his icy tone and involuntarily shuddered. The wind strengthened and the rain pelted the pair with increasing force. The foul weather would soak them before too long. Thunder rumbled to the east. At least the rain will wash the blood away Sheila thought disjointedly. The realization of her situation struck Sheila: standing in a path late at night with a complete stranger and a headless corpse.

"We - We have to call the police," she stuttered.

"And tell them what exactly," came the reply.

"We'll tell them -" Sheila let the sentence go unfinished. What could she tell the police? Who would believe her? She could barely believe that an actual werewolf attacked her.

"Someone has got to listen."

The stranger grunted in reply.

Frustrated Sheila asked, "So what do we do now?"

"We don't do anything. You go home and forget what you've seen. Don't think about it and especially don't talk to anyone about it."

"Forget! How do you suggest that I forget this?" she asked, indicating the corpse.



"Not my problem." Sheila's rescuer turned to leave.

Sheila cried out, "Hey wait, I uh, want to thank you."

"Don't bother. I did what I came here to do." The man gave the corpse a slight kick.

Sheila felt stunned. The werewolf might have killed her and this man acted as if it made no difference. Anger replaced fear. "How can you..." a frightening thought suddenly occurred to Sheila, the image of the two men staring at each other across the bar. "What you came here to do?" Sheila repeated, a note of hysteria entering her voice. "Oh, my God! Bait, you used me for bait!"

Spewing a string of curses, Sheila hurled her petite frame at the imposing man, striking him in the chest. The stranger grabbed the distraught bartender by the wrist, easily restraining her.

Mechanically he said, "I didn't tell you to walk down a deserted path. You made that choice. I could have waited until the werewolf caught you before I jumped in."

Rainwater streaming down her tear-streaked face, Sheila tore her wrists free of his grasp. Stepping back, Sheila stared defiantly at the man. Sheila turned and walked away. A few steps away, she halted. When she looked back, Sheila could not see her

savior. Alone now in the mounting wind and rain, Sheila's fear returned. She fled, running the rest of the way home.

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Five dark figures slipped through the bike path's rain-soaked trees and shrubs. Harsh winds and icy rain continued to saturate the area as the silent quintet surrounded the headless corpse. The smallest figure knelt beside the body, his small, brown fingers tracing the corpse's intricate shoulder tattoo. "Definitely one of us," muttered the kneeling figure. Glancing about, he retrieved the body's discarded torn jeans.

A broad shouldered form barked, "Find the head, now!" The remaining group members cast about.

"Got it," a high-pitched male voice cried out, "it's Lee!"

"Not anymore," said a feminine voice. A deep growl answered this comment.

"Shut it!" snarled the leader, tension in his voice, his agitation evident in the crossing of muscular arms over an equally muscular chest. "Cree, how long ago did this happen?"

Dropping the tattered jeans across the corpse, Cree responded, "15 maybe 20 minutes."

"His totem?"

Shaking his head Cree replied, "Gone."

The feminine voice spoke up, "Ferir pack?"

Lightning flashed, illuminating the chiseled features of the leader, while he pondered the question. This did not have the feel of a rival pack. After a moment, he shrugged and brushed his long black hair out of his face. "Rathe, how many?"

The largest quintet member, nostrils flaring, sniffed the air. "Two, one male, one female," replied Rathe. Pausing to sniff the air again he continued, "The male scent has almost dispersed, but something about the woman's scent. . ." Rathe's voice trailed off as he peered into the darkness.

"That time of the month," the high-pitched male voice sneered.

"Pig," said the group's only female.

Ignoring this exchange the leader gestured to Rathe, "Is the woman's scent strong enough for you to track her?" Rathe nodded. "Then do so."

"As you wish Magnus." Rathe loped off, his heavy work boots pounding out a rhythm of haste, the darkness swallowing his retreating form.

"Lily, go with Rathe and make sure to keep a leash on him. Bring the woman back to the Lair, in one piece." The woman known as Lily nodded once, her cinnamon-colored ponytail slapping wetly against her neck. As she sped off after Rathe, Magnus addressed the remaining quintet members.

"Desmond, you and Cree dispose of the corpse and then meet me back at the club."

The two replied in unison, "Yes Magnus." Desmond and Cree silently bent to their task.

Closing his blue-grey eyes, Magnus raised his head, allowing the rain to wash his face for a moment before stalking off.

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