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Hide and seek. That's the game we were playing one night. The night that everything started to happen.

It's one of my favorite games to play, especially after dark. I'm great at finding places to hide.

There were six of us playing on this particular night. Sometimes there's as many as twelve, which can be really fun.

But tonight wasn't going to be much fun. Oh, it started out fun . . . but that's not the way it

ended up.

"Jeremy!"

My mom's voice echoed down the block and through the small forest where we were playing. We'd been outside for a couple of hours, and the sun had just set. It would be really dark soon, and then it would be a *lot* of fun.

"Jeremy!"

Drats. That was the second time. When Mom calls, I'm supposed to holler back so she knows where I'm at. Problem is, if I yelled now, Colette might find me. She was 'it', and I could hear her searching in the forest not far from where I was hiding.

"Jeremy! Answer me!"

I had no choice. If I didn't answer Mom, she'd come looking for me. Then I'd *really* be in trouble.

"I'm fine Mom!" I shouted out the words as quickly as I could. I hoped that I didn't give away my hiding place to Colette!

"Thirty more minutes!" Mom hollered back from far away. Then I heard our front door close.

Well, I thought, I'm sure Colette heard me. I just

hope she can't hear me well enough to find out where I am hiding.

And I was hiding in a pretty good spot, I must admit. I found a spruce tree that had branches growing all the way to the ground, and I climbed within the thick, prickly limbs and hunkered to the ground as close as I possibly could. I knew that if I could just stay quiet, Colette would never find me here.

Crunch. Crunch-crunch.

I could hear Colette getting closer and closer. I knew she'd heard me, but I was hidden really well.

Crunch. Ker-snap.

She'd stepped on a branch, and stopped.

This is too cool, I thought. She was only a few feet away, but she would never find me here!

An owl hooted from far off. A mosquito buzzed by my ear. Stars began twinkling in the rapidly-coming night.

Crunch.

Colette took a step, and, for the first time, I could see her silhouette in the shadows. She wasn't far away at all. I just needed to sit tight

and not make a sound.

Then I heard a voice from farther away:

"Tag! You're it!"

It was Colette . . . but that was impossible! Colette was standing just a few feet in front of me!

I could hear the crunch and snap of twigs as others emerged from their hiding places — but the figure in front of me didn't move. I must have mistaken someone else for Colette.

I pushed a branch away, and the needles scraped my arm as I stood up.

"I knew she'd never find me," I said to the person standing near. "That's a great hiding spot, there."

Whoever it was, they didn't speak. Instead, I heard a sniffing sound, like a dog that has picked up the scent of something.

"Who are you?" I asked, knowing that it could only be one of four other friends who were playing hide and seek.

No answer.

"Hey, suit yourself," I said, and I began walking away . . . until I heard a low growl.

“Funny,” I said, pulling out a small flashlight from my pocket. “Real funny.” I clicked on the flashlight, shined it directly into the face of whoever it was . . . and received the shock of my life. The figure before me wasn’t one of my friends. It had a hairy face, and a long, sharp nose. Long fangs dripped over the edges of his mouth, and its black eyes glowed an eerie yellow in the gleam of the flashlight.

Right then and there, I knew what it was.

I was face to face – with a werewolf.



I screamed and spun at the same time. I had to get away, and fast.

"Ahhhhhghggghhhh!!!" I cried out as I ran through the brush. Branches whipped at my face and scratched at my arms. Limbs reached out like spiny arms, and I nearly tripped and fell.

"Jeremy!" I heard Colette call out. *"Where are you?!?! What's the matter?!?!"*

"I'm here!" I shouted. *"Help me!"*

I found the trail that weaves through the woods and ran lickety-split, fast as my legs would

carry me, toward our home base. Actually, it's just a small clearing in the woods where we all gather to begin our games of hide and seek.

I ran and ran, not daring to look behind me for fear of seeing the dark figure of the werewolf. I'd heard that werewolves were really fast, and I didn't want to take any chances.

It was growing darker and darker, and I didn't notice the figures coming toward me on the trail until it was too late. I smacked into someone dead-on, and we both went flying, along with two people that were right behind him. I heard Colette gasp as she hit the ground, and then Tyler Norris. Colette and Tyler are two of my best friends.

"Jeremy!" Tyler said as he rolled on the ground. "What's the matter?!?!?"

"Run!" I said, getting to my feet. "There's a werewolf after me!"

"What?!?" Tyler replied. "You're nutty like a fruitcake!"

"What are you talking about?" Colette asked. By now, I had gotten to my feet again. I was

staring back down the trail, trying to see if there was any movement. It was too dark to tell.

"I'm telling you, I saw a werewolf back there," I repeated, still gasping for breath. "I thought it was Colette, but it wasn't."

"Sure," Brian Ludwig mocked. "A werewolf. Yeah, they're all over the place. You gotta watch out for those werewolves."

"I'm serious, you guys!"

The rest of the group had gathered around. There was Tyler, Colette, Brian, Stuart Lester, James Barker, and me. We all live on the same block, just a few houses from one another.

"Jeremy, there's no such thing as werewolves," Colette said. "You probably saw a coyote."

"Hey, if coyotes stand as tall as you on their hind legs, well, then maybe it *was* a coyote," I answered.

"You're making this up," Stuart said.

"Look, you guys," I said. I was getting angry. "I know what I saw. I saw a creature that was about my size. It was standing on its hind legs,

just like a human. Except it had hair all over its face, and it had a dog-like nose. And teeth! Man, did that thing have sharp teeth!"

"Was it really ugly?" James asked.

"Yeah!" I replied.

"Nasty looking?"

"Uh-huh."

"So ugly that you thought you would puke?"

"Yes! Exactly!" I said.

"That settles it, then," James said, matter-of-factly. "That was no werewolf . . . that was my *sister*!"

Everyone started laughing, except Colette and me. "Come on, you guys," she said. "Jeremy really saw something. He's not lying."

"No, I'm not," I said.

"Well, then . . . let's go see if he's still there," Tyler suggested.

Silence.

"Yeah," I said. "Unless you guys are chicken."

"I'm not afraid of any werewolf," Stuart said.

"Me neither," James said.

“Doesn’t bother me a bit,” Brian chimed in.

“Yeah,” said Colette. “The six of us will be safe together. Let’s go and see.”

I pointed my flashlight beam down the trail, and eerie shadows darted and dove.

“We’ll follow you,” Stuart said, pulling out his own flashlight. Colette turned her flashlight on, and so did Brian, Tyler, and Stuart. We were six kids with six flashlights, heading down a trail that led into the forest.

Looking for a werewolf.

What we didn’t know, of course, was that the werewolf was looking for *us*.



We walked down the trail, each of us sweeping our flashlights into the dark forest around us. Bats chittered as they darted through the trees, and I heard the owl hoot again. That's one of the things I like about Madison, Wisconsin, which is where I live. It's a pretty big city, but we live a little ways out, and there are lots of forests and trees right near our neighborhood. Which means that there are plenty of animals, too. You'll see deer and raccoons and owls . . . all kinds of wildlife.

But you're not supposed to see werewolves. Werewolves aren't supposed to be real.

"Are you sure you saw a werewolf?" Brian asked, as we trudged along the trail. "I mean . . . couldn't it have been a bear or something?"

I shook my head. "No way," I replied. "I'm telling you guys . . . I know what I saw. Come on, you know me . . . I'm not making this up. I really was scared. That thing was freaky."

"How much farther do we have to go?" James whined. "I'm missing *SpongeBob*, you know."

"Chill out, James," Colette said. "Your dad is probably recording the show, anyway. He likes it more than you do."

"Well, if we don't find the werewolf soon, I'm going to have to bag it for the night," Brian said. "I've got to get up early to go fishing."

"Awww, is the little baby getting tired?" Stuart chided. Brian ignored the comment.

And the trail wound on. By now, it was really dark. There was no moon, but a zillion stars glistened through the trees.

"See?" Stuart said, pointing his thin flashlight

beam up into the air. "It couldn't have been a werewolf. Werewolves only come out when the moon is full."

"That's just an old wives' tale," Tyler said. "Werewolves can come out at any time."

And then I heard something. It was a crunching, a snapping of branches, and the sound wasn't too far away from us. Stuart heard it, and so did Colette.

The six of us stopped in the middle of the trail, listening. The noise had ceased, and all we could hear were the sounds of the forest.

And then:

Crunch. Snap.

We froze stiff. None of us spoke or even moved.

But we didn't hear anything more. There was only silence. Whatever it was, it wasn't moving around much.

Colette leaned toward me and started to whisper. *"Is this the place where you –"*

But her voice was stopped cold by a shrill, new sound.

A howl.

It was long and loud, and it echoed through the forest . . . and there was no mistaking it.

That howl—that awful, screeching wail—wasn't from a dog or an owl. In fact, no human could make a sound like that.

That howl was from a werewolf.

And when we heard the crunching of branches and the snapping of twigs, I knew that we would never get out of the forest alive.



I suppose you think that we turned and ran.

Wrong.

We *flew*. I don't think our feet hit the ground. We turned and sprang so quickly that we bounced off one another, careening down the dark trail like wild banshees. All of us were screaming . . . even Colette, who usually doesn't scream about anything.

We ran and we screamed, we screamed and we ran. We tore through the dark forest, following our flashlight beams as they bounced

along the trail, trying to put as much distance between us and the ghastly creature that, no doubt, was hot on our trail. And we didn't stop until we reached the edge of the forest and the safety of streetlights that glowed brightly along our block.

When we reached the street, all six of us collapsed, sitting on the curb and gasping for air. It was a long time before anyone said anything.

"I'm sorry, Jeremy," Tyler said. "I should have believed you."

"Me too," said James. The rest of the group nodded.

"That was the freakiest sound I've ever heard in my life," Brian said between his heaving gasps. "I didn't think we were going to make it out of there. Not alive, anyway."

"That's what I was trying to tell you guys," I said. "Whatever is in those woods . . . whether it's a werewolf or not . . . isn't human."

"You can bet it's not a cartoon, either," Stuart said, which prompted mild laughter from everyone.

"So . . . what do we do now?" Colette said, pulling a lock of hair away from her face.

"I don't know about you guys," James said, "but I'm going to go home and forget the whole thing. I'm going to wake up in the morning, and this whole thing will be a dream. There's no such thing as werewolves, anyway."

We all sat on the curb, catching our breath. Above us, bugs swarmed and darted beneath the pale blue streetlight.

I would have liked to think that James was right. It would have been great to wake up and discover that everything was a dream, that we hadn't even been in the woods playing hide and seek.

But that's not what happened.

Soon, I would discover—with absolute certainty—that what had happened to us was *real*.

And as I sat on the curb that night with my friends, I wondered about werewolves. I wondered if they really did exist. I wondered if I would ever see the creature again . . . and if I wanted to.

I didn't have to wait very long . . . for the werewolf had followed us. Oh, we didn't know it at the time, but the werewolf had crept through the shadows and was watching us at that very moment.

We were safe, of course, because we were under the glow of the streetlight.

But later that night, after I went to bed, I heard a noise outside my window. I got up to investigate . . . and what I saw sends shivers of terror down my spine to this very day.

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