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WOLF TEARS

By Suzanne Nikolaisen
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The garden was overgrown. Weeds crowded the yard from the vegetable garden to the flower beds. Matthew had simply not been able to break away from the office to work on the garden and Mary had simply been ignoring it. Now, the job looked like too much, but he had to do something. He had been going nuts just waiting for a call about Ryan. This was the second week that his son had been missing.

The sun was low on the horizon, and it looked like a scoop of orange sherbet melting into the horizon. Orange sherbet had been one of Ryan's most favorite things in the world. Tears stung Matthew's eyes, and he wondered if he would ever see his son again.

The wheat grass that was growing up around the tomato plants was going to seed, and two large milk weeds were crowned in feathery seeds. Matthew began to redefine the rose garden from the lawn, sculpting the flower bed as clouds began to gather in the darkening twilight. The clouds didn't look like they would bring much rain, if any. Matthew knew that the night would be long, and he hoped that if he had worked hard enough after a full day in the office, that he might be able to sleep for a couple of hours.

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Mary had left to go to her mother's after Ryan had disappeared. There hadn't been anything left of their marriage except for Ryan, for the past three years, and when he disappeared, she had up and left Matthew. Mary would call every couple of days to see if he had heard from Ryan. It seemed strange to him that she didn't call every day, but he just discounted it as par for the course with Mary.

The edge of the rose garden didn't look half as bad now and he sat down on the grass looking into the shadow filled flower garden. The sunset had almost disappeared, and the porch light wasn't very bright. Maybe he would go in after a few more minutes. A noise broke the silent evening, a stirring of some animal in the vegetable garden, but Matthew couldn't spot anything. Probably just one of the McGarveys' cats. The garden had been well defined, but as Mary became too wrapped up in her friends away from home, she had virtually ignored all of the household chores. Everything had fallen to Matthew, and he spent the weekends mowing the lawn, catching up on dishes, laundry, cleaning - with Ryan's help, but for the last month, he'd been too busy to work on the garden.

The rose bushes gave way to a path that led to the vegetable garden, and a bed of clover was in bloom on the other side of the path. Tears broke free, and he rested his head in his hands. Ryan was only eleven. What had happened to him? The police had been trying to locate him, but as the days flicked past, Matthew worried more and more that they would never find him.

The sunset was now only a gray pool on the horizon and twilight was falling over the city. Maybe he should call the police, and see if they had found anything, but he knew that he shouldn't, he'd talked to them before he left work. He decided to wait until the morning. They would call him if they discovered anything. The shadows that the night brought seemed evil to him, as though they had swallowed up his young son and hidden him away in their most secret corner. He put his beer down, noticing it was spilling into the grass, but ignoring it. Why was this happening? Ryan had never done anything to deserve this, so why was this happening?

Tears ran down his cheeks in hot streams, the wind drying them partially. The pine trees had become darker than the night sky, and the willow tree was only a dark splotch in the night. The porch

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light had gone out while he had been crying, and this was the first that he had noticed it. Was the power out? He looked over the north fence at the Wilberns'. Their lights were on, and he could see the street lamp glowing above the fence to the front yard. The backyard was full of ominous shapes, the roses clustered together in shadowy forms as though they were ready to creep into the night. He picked up the beer can, and it popped loudly as he squeezed it.

The lights out game. The thought rang in his mind as loudly as a bell in a church tower. Ryan had created the game, because he liked to stay up late playing games on his computer and he would pretend to be asleep when Matthew would stop in to say goodnight. Ryan had made it a game to listen for him and would jump into bed, having turned the monitor to his computer, and the lights off. Most of the time Ryan would still be struggling to control his breathing when Matthew opened the door. As Ryan pretended to sleep, Matthew would usually sit down, turn the monitor back on, and start playing the game that Ryan had left paused, to Ryan's loud protests, but Matthew loved it.

Had Ryan come home and turned off the lights to wait for him to come find him? Was Ryan home? The bulb had probably burned out, but the idea wouldn't leave his mind. Had the noise in the garden been his son? Was Ryan in there waiting for him? With chills running up his arms, he ran across the yard and up the cement steps to the sliding door. The glass was shut now. He had only closed the screen door... or was it just Mary? He felt sick at the thought. He didn't want to see her now or really ever again. She had become cruel, and the way she treated Ryan was more like someone tolerating an unwanted pet. That was, until he had been reported missing, and then suddenly she was playing the part of the worried mother.

The door was unlocked and he slid it open slowly. The scent of a wet dog assailed him and he flipped on the kitchen light, as well as the porch light. There was nothing in the kitchen or the dining room to be seen. What in the hell was going on? Had he left the front door open? He jogged into the living room, but the door was shut. Mary had never allowed them to have a dog, so Ryan and he had contented themselves with two cats in the beginning. The cats had disappeared, or run away as Mary

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had put it, now they just had an aquarium.

The smell was so strong that he was almost nauseated, He sat down on a bar stool and realized that he should get something to protect himself with, if there was a dog in the house. He grabbed the broom and proceeded to search the house starting with the basement, then the main level, and lastly the upstairs, where Ryan's room was, along with his own down the hall.

The smell seemed to have evaporated or just disappeared now, the basement had held no scent at all. He had just felt safer checking. His own room and the master bath were empty and he walked down the hall, checking the bathroom, which was empty. Then he came to Ryan's room. The door was closed. He had left it open ever since Ryan had disappeared. Shivers ran along the nape of his neck as he reached for the door knob. A closed door would suggest knocking, but the room was probably empty. He knocked, and when there was no answer he felt slightly foolish for even having done that. He turned the doorknob slowly, unsure of what he could find, and unsure that he had the courage in him to take it when he saw the empty room.

The door opened quietly, and he saw immediately that Ryan was in bed, asleep; not pretending as he used to, but asleep as though he had been running for days and days and not sleeping. The room reeked of dog fur and he wondered what was going on, but if Ryan was too tired to shower, then let him sleep. He pulled the covers closer around his son's shoulders. He was tempted for a moment to wake him up, but then decided to wait, He could wait to hear what had happened. Obviously Ryan had intended to play the lights out game, but had fallen asleep in the process. Poor kid must have been through Hell. He'd find out where he'd been later on. First he'd make something to eat and whip up a milk shake, then he'd go talk to his son and get a little food into his stomach. He looked half starved.

Matthew's cheeks were wet with tears of relief as he poured the last of the milk shake into the second cup. Then with the tray loaded with sandwiches, chips, and the milk shakes, he climbed the stairs to his son's room. He had left the door open, and it was closed again so he knocked. Again there was no response, so he opened it to find his son staring at a picture on the monitor, a picture of the

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moon. The white light from the picture glowed against Ryan's tortured face, and Matthew put the tray down on the bed and went to kneel by Ryan's chair.

"What is it son?"

Ryan looked startled, but the wild look left his eyes, and for the first time Matthew recognized his son. Tears were brimming over and Ryan threw his arms around Matthew.

"Dad!"

"Hey kiddo. I brought up some food, and then we've got to call your Mother and let her know your okay."

"Mom? No, don't call her." His son's voice held such conviction that he wasn't sure what to say.

"She's worried about you. I can't just leave her in the dark."

"Yes, you can."

"What kind of talk is this? She's your..."

"She hates me."

"What?"

"She's the one that drove me out, the one who wouldn't let me become a part of the pack."

The dog smell... "What pack, what are you talking about?" Matthew's mouth was dry and he sat down on the floor nearby, his back against the wall.

"She's a werewolf."

"What?"

"I'm not kidding Dad. I swear it."

"Look Ryan you've been through a traumatic experience..."

"No, Dad, I'm one too."

Matthew stared at his son in horror. Where was he coming up with this story? There could be a logical explanation for the dog smell, but his wife and son, werewolves? No, he couldn't accept that.

"Hey, why don't we eat?"

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"Sure." Ryan dropped the subject as quickly as he had focused on it, and he ate as though he hadn't eaten in weeks.

"She wouldn't let me eat. I couldn't join them. I couldn't fight my way to the food." His voice sounded so forlorn that Matthew was having a hard time differentiating from his son's reality and what had really happened. A kidnapper... anything, but not discovering he was a werewolf.

"Why don't you take a bath, and I'll go call the police and let them know I found you."

"Dad, you can't. Then she'll find out. You can't tell her, or she'll come and try to kill me!" Ryan lifted up his shirt and a large bite mark discolored his side with bruises and puncture marks.

"Holy... Ryan why didn't you tell me you were hurt? Come on, into the bathroom."

"But, I'm..."

"Now." He couldn't believe Ryan hadn't said anything. Sure he wasn't a wimp, but he couldn't imagine sitting there eating dinner before having anything that painful attended to. The bathroom light was harsh and bright, and Ryan looked pale in the illumination. Was there any truth to what he had said? Come off it. He looked at his son intently.

"Okay take off your shirt and let me take a look at that."

While Ryan was pulling off his t-shirt, Matthew pulled out the peroxide, Neosporin, and a washcloth to clean the wounds with. After a close inspection, he saw that Ryan was already starting to heal, but he soaped up the wash cloth and washed the bite. He poured peroxide onto it, wincing at his son's obvious pain, as Ryan squirmed and clenched his teeth.

"Ow, Dad!"

"It's gotta get clean, or you'll get an infection. That's one heck of a bite you've got. That must've been some dog. That must be why you were hallucinating..."

"I'm not a liar."

"No I'm not calling you one, but when you're sick you can see funny things."

"I saw her, and her pack before she bit me."

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Matthew started putting away the bandages and ointment. How could he argue with him, when he was so intent on his story?

"Look, just take a sponge bath and don't get the bandage wet, and I'll talk to you some more when you're done."

He let himself out of the door, and went down to the living room to wait for his son. He really should call Mary, but if that would only frighten Ryan, why should he? He could wait and talk it over with Ryan, and find out what was really behind all of this. He leaned back in his chair. It was so good to have his son in the house again. He could hear the water running, and the shampoo bottles clanking. His house had magically turned back into a home. Ryan was home.

He woke suddenly, still sitting in his chair, but there was more light than just the light coming from the lamp on the oak couch table. There was sunlight pouring in through the windows. The whole night had passed. He had slept the rest of the night away. He had needed to catch up on his sleep as much as Ryan. The hours of pacing through the kitchen waiting for the police to call - for anyone to call - and the sleepless nights of the past weeks. He got out of the chair, stretching, and trying to work the kinks out. Matthew crossed the living room and went into the kitchen, where he called the office.

"Hello, Peggy?"

"Yes, is this Matt?"

"Yeah, listen I don't think..." He could feel someone staring at him, it was uncanny how intently. Probably just Ryan.

"Hang on for just a minute, will you?" Someone was definitely watching him, was it Ryan? If not, then who? He turned around, and dropped the phone. A young white wolf, nearly a pup, was sitting near the kitchen doorway.

"Oh my God."

He could hear Peggy trying to talk to him, and he snatched up the phone.

"Peggy? Listen I'm really not feeling well this morning, I'm not coming in, okay?"

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"Anything I can do?"

"No, thanks. I'll just see you tomorrow."

His heart was racing as he put down the phone. He hadn't taken his eyes off of the wolf pup since he had discovered it. He wasn't just a wolf pup, it was Ryan. He knew it as though he had always known his son was a werewolf.

"Oh, Ry, I..." He couldn't finish. "Come here kid." The pup trotted across the floor. The bandage, too big for him now, was falling off.

"I'll have to cut the bandage off..." He found that he was just babbling. His kid was a wolf. No, not a wolf, a werewolf... that meant he would be turning back into a human child again, but when? Tonight? Was he just going crazy with his grief for his missing son? No, Ryan was real enough. He couldn't call Mary. There was no way. And there was no way he could stay in the same city as Mary. She'd come after Ryan. Now he understood why she had alienated herself from him. She didn't like her son, and she was going to try and have other children, and not be burdened with caring for a reminder of someone she loathed, namely Matthew.

"What are we going to do?" Matthew asked Ryan, who let out a small whimper which broke Matthew's heart. He had to get Ryan away from his Mother. If what he had said was true, and she wanted to be free of her husband and her unwanted changeling child, then he needed to get them as far from her as possible.

Matthew got up and jogged up the stairs to his bedroom, and pulled out his suitcase and began to pack. He didn't understand the supernatural, he didn't want to understand, but he knew that he didn't want to get wrapped up in anything that involved Mary. He was putting his doc kit into the suitcase when he heard a yelp, and saw the Ryan-pup slam against the wall. What in the Hell? He looked up and saw Mary as he had never seen her before. Ryan had slipped away, probably under the bed, smart boy. He hoped he was okay. What kind of witch was his mother to hurt him like that?

"Mary." It was only a statement.

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"You're in over your head, Matthew." Her voice lilted sweetly, but her green eyes were vicious.

"No, Mary. I just think you'd better leave me and my son alone. I'm sorry that we're not what you wanted."

"No, you weren't."

"Well, too bad for you! Now get out, and don't ever touch our son again, or you'll deal with me." He didn't care if she was a werewolf, or Frankenstein for that matter. If she ever touched Ryan again... he could feel his anger growing.

"He won't survive; he's a runt. I'm doing him a favor."

"Oh please! Just get out. We don't want your favors."

"I'll find him. He's my son."

"And mine. You find him, you'll be out of luck."

"He can't control the changes. He slips in and out of each form, throughout the day. It's really quite unnerving."

Matthew just stared at her, unable to see the sweet Mary he had once loved and married. Just then he heard a noise. Ryan had nosed out from under the bed, and he saw hatred flash in Mary's eyes. She started running for him, and he yelped and backed under the bed in a flash of white fur.

"Come on sweetheart, Mommy wants to see you." She was grinning at Matthew, daring him to do something.

"Ryan, stay away from her."

She was still grinning and reaching under the bed, as though her arm would grow long enough to reach him.

"Get out!" Matthew yelled. "I've had enough of this. You don't come into my house and treat me and my son like this. I'm going to take out a restraining order on you. Get out!"

She sat down, sticking her bottom lip out, as though pouting might be cute. He crossed the room and took her arm. "Get up, or do I need to throw you out?"

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"Oh, quite the man." She had been looking down, but suddenly their eyes locked. Her eyes had changed and they now had large slits down the middle where the pupil had been. Her eyes held a vicious glimmer.

"Don't interfere. Move, get out of town, but don't come between me and my son." Her voice had been undertoned with a growl. Matthew drew his hand back and slapped her hard across the face, and physically grabbed her and shoved her out of the bedroom door. She had been changing... changing even further into the beast that had attacked Ryan.

"Stay back, Ryan!" he ordered, knowing Ryan wouldn't be coming out for anything in the world. As he shoved her out of the room, her claw ripped his arm open, and he kicked her toward the stairs - half beast, half woman with pure madness in her eyes. She crouched at the edge of the stairs and then moved to stand up, changing more as she moved, and suddenly Matthew knew that she would kill him without a second thought. He ran toward her, and lunged, hands in front of him. He shoved, and she teetered at the top of the stairs. When she had seemed to regain her balance, she lost it again as her legs became more canine. She fell back, tumbling as though caught in time, hitting the hard wood stairs and growling in rage at her own weakness. When she hit the floor she laid still, all wolf.

Ryan came out and stood at the top of the stairs, his little furry pup ears raised forward in interest.

"I think she's dead, Ry... I know werewolves and silver bullets, but really she was only flesh and blood. Let's get out of here. She may be alive. I don't want to wait and find out."

He left his suitcase and just grabbed his wallet, carrying Ryan downstairs. The wolf that Mary had changed into was gone, and he could only hope that she was dead. What happened to a werewolf's body when it died? Did it turn to dust or something? He was afraid that he was becoming too imaginative. She had probably survived the fall.

Once they were in the Honda, Matthew locked them in, and they drove down all of the old familiar streets, past the grocery store, and the strip mall with the computer store Ryan liked to frequent.

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They got on the freeway and headed away from Salt Lake, away to another city or town where they might make a life for themselves without the fear of Mary coming after them. Maybe she would find them, but Matthew would find help. He had to. Ryan deserved a normal life, despite what his mother thought of him. He already knew where he wanted to go. They'd head up to the Pacific Northwest, maybe along the way or in their new home they could learn to control Ryan's gift, and he would be able to live a decent life as a human, with special abilities that no one would need to know about. Tears had matted the fur around Ryan's wolf-pup brown eyes, and Matthew's heart broke.

"She'll be okay Ry, we just... we have to get away from her."

He paused and tousled Ryan's white furry ears.

"Love you, kid."

The morning had passed, and the afternoon sky was filling with thunderheads. The sun had disappeared. Ryan was laying on on the front seat, and Matthew kept his eyes on the road. Ryan was a tough kid. They'd be okay.