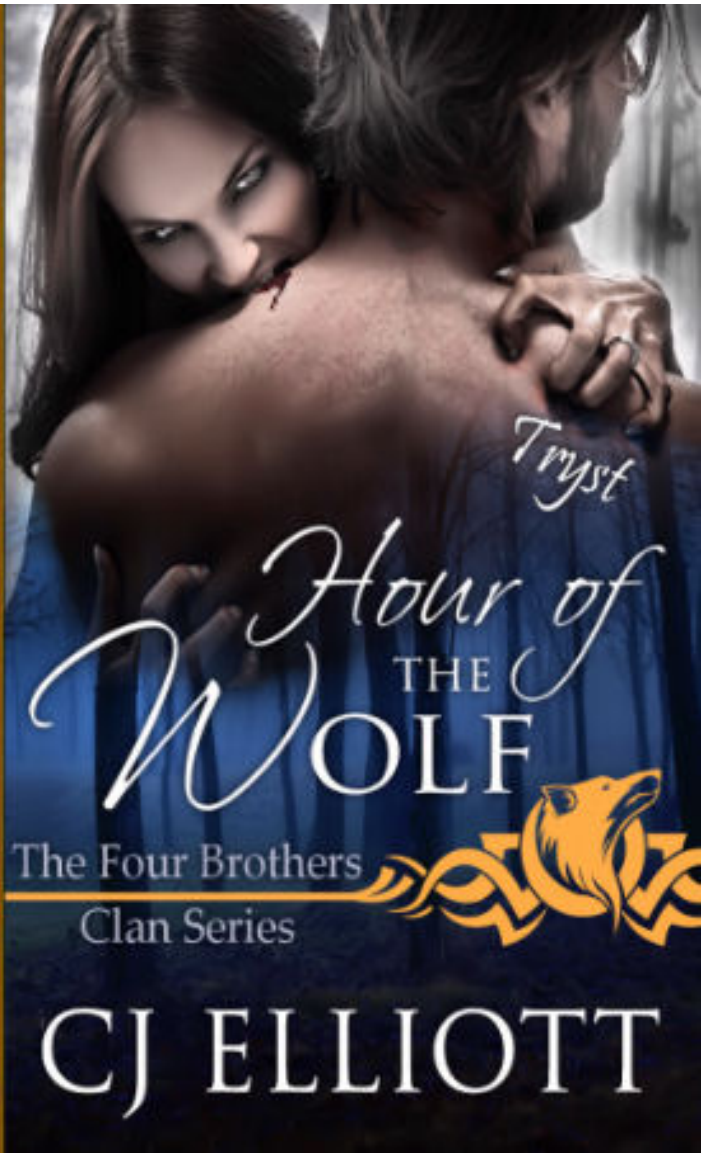


C
O
B
B
L
E
S
T
O
N
E

P
R
E
S
S



Trust

Hour of THE WOLF

The Four Brothers
Clan Series



CJ ELLIOTT

The Four Brothers Clan Series:

Hour of the Wolf

By

CJ Elliott

Hour of the Wolf by CJ Elliott

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Hour of the Wolf

Copyright© 2010 CJ Elliott

ISBN: 978-1-60088-543-3

Cover Artist: Sable Grey

Editor: Stephanie Parent

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced electronically or in print without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

Cobblestone Press, LLC

www.cobblestone-press.com

Dedication

For Muriel, thank you for supporting my career as it grows.
And I hope my French passes the test of your experienced eye!

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank everyone who made this story possible—my friends and family for all their support and patience, Jambrea Jo Jones for an inspired critique, all the ladies at International Heat for their tireless friendship and support, Stephanie and Deanna and everyone at Cobblestone Press for helping me develop the manuscript into a beautiful finished product.

More than anything else, Reese Emmerson craved quiet. Not that she needed to escape from the hustle and bustle of Fredericksburg—as if the university town she called home could be referred to as hustling and bustling. She longed most for respite from the *whispering*.

One would think, for a person of Reese's abilities, the daytime hours would be toughest, but this wasn't the case. Daytime whispers were usually innocuous. *Pick up a gallon of milk. Don't forget dinner tonight with the dean. Chem paper due. French Lit paper due. Art History paper due.* As an assistant professor of English Lit at Mary Washington University, she lived near campus, and there were always lots of whispers about papers due. These mundane things she could block out. Not like the voices she heard at night.

Does she know I'm screwing her roommate?

That's it. Today was the last time I cut myself. For real, this time.

C'mon, take drink, you little bitch. Then you won't be too good for me.

Help me. God, somebody help me.

I need something to come down. I need to sleep.

Reese understood a longing for deep, dreamless sleep. She rarely enjoyed a full night's rest. Some random whisper would wake her; then her own worries would kick in. and she'd be up for the rest of the night. *The hour of the wolf*—that was what her father, Gene, called it. That time after midnight but before dawn when all one's worries came home to roost. Fear preying on itself, using vulnerability and fatigue to inflate its importance. Reese knew the phenomenon all too well.

But at the cottage, the whispers couldn't reach her. Situated near

Hour of the Wolf by CJ Elliott

Smith Mountain Lake, but far enough into the woods that she had no neighbors for miles in each direction, the cabin gave her a much needed sanctuary. Even on the drive down, the whispers weren't too bad except when going through Richmond, particularly Jackson Ward. Junkies and whores and gangbangers, oh my! Too much sorrow to block out there. But past that onslaught of desperation, Reese could turn up the radio and think for a little while that she was just like everyone else. It was one of her favorite games: pretending to be normal. But she wasn't.

The whispers had always been there, as long as she could remember. At age two, she'd been diagnosed with autism. At eight, the diagnosis was adjusted to early onset schizophrenia. That was her label until she turned ten and met Dr. Kate Fielding. Reese loved Dr. Kate.

The older woman was just one in a long line of medical and mental health professionals Reese's parents had turned to for help. Why did their daughter wake up screaming? Why did she refuse contact with some cherished family friends only to turn around the next day and embrace a total stranger? Why did she say so many inappropriate things? Reese knew Dr. Kate could help her, so she told the psychiatrist the secret no one else could understand. She told Dr. Kate about the whispers.

"Your daughter is not schizophrenic or autistic," Dr. Fielding announced after their third session. "She's gifted, and we have to help her see her unique talent as a gift."

The woman went on to explain that the voices Reese heard were far too organized and coherent to be the product of an afflicted mind.

"Why do you say that?" Reese's mother, Stella, asked.

"Because I know my own thoughts when I hear them recited back to me, and I assure you I have a very organized mind."

"Come again?"

"These 'whispers' she talks about, they're other people's thoughts, and she can hear them."

Reese's parent thanked the good doctor and left the office in a hurry. Funny to think the psychiatrist herself was off her rocker. Perhaps unable to resist the possibility that Dr. Fielding might be right—no matter how far-fetched the idea sounded—her mother tested the theory on the

Hour of the Wolf by CJ Elliott

drive home. Much to her parents' surprise, their daughter could tell them what they were thinking.

"What am I imagining now?" her mother asked.

"The grapefruit with Equal you ate for breakfast...and the four candy bars you sneaked afterward from your dresser drawer."

Stella shot Gene a look of chagrin. It was the first time Reese felt a bit like a circus freak, though it would not be the last. But, hey, circus freak was worlds better than mental patient. It was also the first time she understood the power she held.

Due to little Reese's revelation, her mother's oppressive ban of sugar from the house was lifted. Reese also learned the phrase, "You damned hypocrite, Stella!" but her dad wasn't mean enough to say it aloud.

Stella and Gene took Reese to see Dr. Fielding three times a week. Kate's silvery hair, pinned into a neat bun during office hours, came to represent peace for the girl. The doctor taught Reese relaxation and refocusing techniques to block out the whispers, but no amount of mental training helped her during sleep. Her mind too open and unrestrained during REM phases, it picked up all projections within a certain proximity, the most alarming of which tore her from her nightly slumber. She'd never found a way to control the condition. With Dr. Kate's death two years ago, Reese's hope had died with her beloved therapist.

The Jeep's headlights cut through the dense fog that rose off the warm moist soil to greet the evening air, swept in on cooling breezes from the lake. The wood-paneled, one-room cottage peeked out from behind enormous pines. Turning off the car's ignition, Reese grabbed her duffel bag and purse. A deep breath of the forest's fecund scent calmed her at once. Quiet at last, if only for a few days.

* * * * *

Humidity settled along the dips in the lakeside terrain. Despite the heat of the August evening, mist cloaked the roots of oak trees and black huckleberry bushes surrounding the A-frame cabin.

Hour of the Wolf by CJ Elliott

Reese stared out the bay window facing the wilderness. When the trees were devoid of leaves in the winter, she could make out glimpses of the lake, several hundred yards down the mountain. But now an ocean of late-summer greenery extended in various shades of green, rippling like a patchwork quilt, as far as the eye could see.

She lifted a porcelain teacup to her lips, a tisane of blueberries, lemon verbena and Valerian root that soothed her senses. With the warm, fragrant liquid, she drank in the peace around her. Sweet, expansive, solid and perfect peace.

Her nightcap finished, she yawned, stretched and pulled herself up. Making her way to the cabin's loft area, her bare feet sunk into the thick woolen stair runner as she ascended the narrow steps. Out of habit more than a need to cool off, she clicked on the ceiling fan switch at the top of the staircase. A soft, incandescent glow bathed the sleeping area, and the fan's hum provided white noise against which she would set her first good night's sleep in weeks.

Her faded blue jeans slid easily over her narrow hips, and she cast them into a wicker laundry basket with her cotton T-shirt and undergarments. Naturally slim, she had no need of the massive brassieres that air-dried on her mother's shower curtain rod on laundry day. Reese had taken after her father, all angles and delineated bone structure. Camisoles with minimal support served her just fine. She donned a fresh one and a pair of form-fitting boy shorts, then slid between downy cotton sheets. She'd changed the bedclothes earlier and now relaxed with the feel of fresh linens against her skin. They smelled of freesia fabric softener.

Yawning again, Reese plaited her shoulder-length hair into a French braid and secured it with an elastic hairband. Again on auto-pilot, she reached up and clicked off the overhead light switch. As soon as her head hit the pillow, the pull of sleep overtook her.

* * * * *

Can't catch me. The voice rasped, desperation breaking through its bravado.

Hour of the Wolf by CJ Elliott

Run faster. Gotta catch up. Gotta run faster. This voice was deeper, more authoritative.

Reese swam to the surface of her consciousness. No, this wasn't right—no whispers. It couldn't be. She was in her sanctuary, her fortress of solitude, so to speak.

Run, run, run as fast as you can. The raspy voice intruded on her semi-asleep state again.

When the deeper voice replied, *Filthy murderer*, Reese sat up. She pulled the sheets around her body and listened. Only the thundering of her heartbeat and panting rhythm of her breath rang in her ears. Could've been a dream, though to the best of her knowledge she'd never dreamed any of the whispers. The internal monologues that woke her invariably continued after she'd awakened. Straining to pick up the voices again, she was met with only silence. Must've been a dream.

She settled again into the comfort of her bed, the sheets still warm from her sleeping body's impression. When she had almost returned to her deep slumber, a single word popped into her head, repeated over and over: *Vengeance. Vengeance. Vengeance...*

Bolting upright, she cast her mind out into the darkness around her, but—just as before—no more whispers greeted her.

* * * * *

By the time Reese woke again, the sun had almost reached its zenith in the sky. It'd taken her a long while to fall asleep after the strange whispers in the middle of the night, but once she'd given herself over, she'd slept a solid nine or ten hours.

Shaking the groggy feeling, she went about her day as usual: breakfast, a swim in the lake, shower, a couple hours of reading—Ursula K. Le Guin's *Lavinia*—followed by several hours of writing and edits on a soon-to-be published paper—the role of feminist backlash on contemporary women's fiction, particularly the genre dubbed “chick lit.” On a hot streak, Reese forgot to eat lunch, but her stomach's rumbling soon forced her to stop and slap together a roast beef sandwich around

eight that evening.

Having slept until noon, she wasn't anywhere near sleepy until well into the wee hours of the morning. She curled up in bed with *Lavinia* and almost finished the book before nodding off to sleep. And again, the whispers came, only this time the deep, commanding voice rose up alone against the tapestry of her dreams. Half-formed thoughts streaked through her mind.

Push on until he's found...monstrosity...

Sully...vengeance.

Disturbed, Reese broke from her slumber and tore open the curtains behind her bed. No one lurked outside her cottage. And, like the night before, no whispers came while she was awake.

She crept downstairs, fixed herself a cup of Red Zinger and sank into the wingback chair that faced the forest. The night's blackness, tinged purple by an impending dawn, lay still and otherwise undisturbed outside her window.

She shook her hair out of its braid and grasped a lock with her left hand, rubbing the smooth ends across her index finger. She often fidgeted with her hair when perplexed or worried. Tonight, she vacillated between the two emotions in equal measure. Having been treated as a mental patient for a good chunk of her life, old versions of self-image died hard. What if she really was a head case, and this mind-reading mumbo jumbo was one big delusion of grandeur?

Feeling a panic attack coming on, she remembered words of comfort spoken by Dr. Kate when Reese had voiced this concern many times in the past. The good doctor had said, "An unhinged mind does not question its sanity. Therefore, by experiencing this doubt, you have affirmed your undeniable grasp on reality." Then again, maybe this reassuring memory was nothing more than the fondest wish of her own psychosis.

No—she pushed away the familiar fear. She had control of her faculties. She always had. The other labels she'd carried as a child had been the product of minds too unimaginative to conceive of her abilities. Dr. Kate had assured Reese of this often enough.

Hour of the Wolf by CJ Elliott

Why then did voices intrude in her sleep only to disappear when she awoke? Reese didn't know, but she was going to find out.

* * * * *

After forcing herself to take several naps throughout the day, she was wide awake come nightfall. Midnight marked the beginning of her vigil, though she'd heard the whispers closer to dawn the past two nights. She didn't want to risk missing her sly visitors. A strong pot of black tea at her side, she took up sentry on the cabin's back deck. If anyone skulked around the woods bent on some type of revenge—be it justified or misguided—the deck gave her a good vantage point from which to view events. If any should unfold at all.

Hours passed with only a light breeze rustling tree branches. Sweat beaded her forehead as she gave the ends of her hair a good working over. She'd drained the pot of tea, which added to her discomfort. The caffeinated part of her longed to do jumping jacks while reciting the Gettysburg Address verbatim, while her bladder begged to make a run for the powder room. Her bladder won out.

Loathe to miss her nighttime visitors, she dashed in to the downstairs half bath and relieved herself as quickly as she could. She took a moment to wash her hands only to catch a glimmer of the now familiar voice—

Where? he asked.

Her heart set aflutter, she rushed outside to find the owner of this disembodied whisper. Scanning the copse of trees from right to left and right again, she saw nothing, no one.

Then a streak of silver caught her attention. The movement was much farther below eye level than she'd expected it to be, and she rushed to the deck railing to get a better look. There, perhaps forty feet away, stood a silver wolf. His ribs jutted along the length of his chest, fighting for prominence against a coat of matted fur. Every panted breath rippled just beneath his skin. With slack jowls and an almost intelligent expression, his eyes shone golden in the moonlight and locked onto hers.

Hour of the Wolf by CJ Elliott

A rasped word, again like a snippet of a more complete sentiment, pushed its way inside of her: *Beautiful*.

As suddenly as it had appeared, the wolf disappeared into the night.

Reese clapped a hand to her gaping mouth. She was sure the whisper—or piece of a whisper—had come from *the wolf*. And now she was also sure she'd plum lost her mind.

* * * * *

Her morning cup of black tea proved inadequate to rouse her senses. Sleep deprived and swimming in self-doubt, Reese took a drive to the general store a few miles up the road. She'd tried to make sense of the night's events, but unable to do so and unable to get any sleep, she decided to binge on sugar and fat. One of Blinky's deep-fried, glazed chocolate pies would hit the spot. Or six. No, not six, but maybe two. She could definitely put down two. Reese pulled her Jeep into a spot outside the split-log storefront.

"Miss Emmerson," Blinky himself greeted her as she walked through the front door. He set aside his newspaper, a wide grin on his weathered face. "This is a pleasant surprise. What can I do you for?"

"Hey, Blinks." She leaned against the counter, a knot twisting in her stomach. "I need a double shot of chocolate...and lard."

"Two puddin' pies coming right up, darling." He shuffled over to the pastry case. "What's got you down?"

"Oh, nothing. Just a sugar jones." Reese cast her gaze around the small store, taking comfort in its functional decor. Rows of sheet metal shelving, painted an industrial beige, held pragmatic inventory, and a forlorn refrigerator case held beverages and fresh bait.

Behind the counter stood a hotdog rotisserie, soft-serve ice cream dispenser, and—the piece de resistance—the deep fryer. Blinky's deceased wife, Celia, had created a line of fried pies: apple, cherry, and pumpkin, but Blinky created the award-winning recipe with a pack of instant pudding, marshmallow fluff, and a can of evaporated milk. He folded the

fudgy mixture into a buttery crust, fried the concoction at three hundred fifty degrees, then rolled the sizzling, golden pastry in confectioner's sugar. The finished product was nothing short of divine.

The older man plucked two of the inspired creations from a rotating glass case and dropped them into a paper bag. Reese thanked him, handed over two dollars and ten cents and turned to leave, but stopped short. "This might sound a little nutty, but have there been any strange events in the area lately? Any unsavory incidents around the lake?"

Blinks scratched his balding pate and then stroked his chin. "No, ma'am. Not that I've heard...and I usually hear everything."

Reese gave him a half smile. "That's why I asked."

She turned to leave again, but another question nagged at her and she decided to ask, "Have you ever seen a gray wolf in this area?"

"A gray wolf? Heck, no. Ain't been a gray wolf in Virginia since the late eighteen hundreds. Some red wolves that been reintroduced to North Carolina have shown up in these parts, but never a gray wolf."

"That's what I figured. I thought I saw one last night, but I guess I was mistaken."

"Could've been a runaway Husky. Them dogs look a lot like wolves."

Great, I really am going crazy. She nodded. "You're right. Thanks again for the pies, Blinky."

"You're welcome, Miss Emmerson. Any time. Have a good one."

Reese returned the well wishes and scooted out the door, nearly tripping over a tall, dark-haired man who stood just outside the doorway. At once his demeanor and appearance struck her. He wore well broken-in jeans, a form-fitting tee, a simple leather belt, and a pair of black leather shoes. A pocket watch fob ran from one belt loop to his right pocket. A place for everything and everything in its place. Except his hair. His dark, wavy locks—not too long, not too short—looked as though they had a mind of their own and no amount of hair gel would tame them. Not that he seemed to use any.

"Pardon me." It wasn't the man's deep voice that caught her

attention, though its smooth baritone washed over her, but rather his total lack of readability that left her stunned. His mind was absolutely still—an unprecedented occurrence for Reese. Dumbfounded and a bit embarrassed, she murmured a disjointed apology and shuffled past him.

Aflame with mortification, she fumbled with her keys and rushed to enter the shelter of her vehicle.

“Ma’am?”

His sudden reappearance rattled her; she could always tell when someone stood so close to her, their thoughts loud and clear at that range. Not this man’s. A gaping silence emanated from him in glaring contrast to the cacophony that arose from everyone else in town. Her eyes searched his piercing baby blues for a sign or a clue, but no tell-tale emotion lay there either. Who the hell was this guy?

“I didn’t mean to startle you.” He placed a hand on her upper arm, too intimate a gesture, and yet Reese felt at ease with the contact.

She brushed a lock of hair from her eyes. “Not your fault. I’ve had...I’ve had a really strange couple of days.”

“Sorry if this is none of my business, but I just had to tell you—I overheard your conversation in the store, and you’re not crazy. I know for a fact there *are* gray wolves in these mountains. You say you saw one?”

“Yeah. Last night.”

“Near your cabin.”

“Right.”

He nodded, and a lock of jet-black hair fell across his unlined forehead. “Be sure to keep your distance if you see him again, ma’am. A lone wolf is cause for concern. They’re often starving and desperate. And there’s a reason it’s been turned out of its pack. Most wolves won’t approach humans, but some...”

The thought trailed off on his lips and hung unfinished in the air. Out of habit, Reese tried to tune into his unspoken words but found she couldn’t. His meaning came through nonetheless. The wolf she’d seen had looked hungry and mangy.

“You know a lot about wolves,” she said.

He shrugged as if too modest to confirm the veracity of her

statement.

“Well, thanks. I’ll keep an eye out.”

“I hope I haven’t worried you. I just wanted to tell you to be careful. He probably won’t show up again, anyway.”

“No, I’m fine. It’s good to know I’m not seeing things.”

“I’m sure... Well, I guess I’ve held you up enough.” He released his gentle grasp on her arm, but the heat of his touch lingered there. “Take care, ma’am.”

Reese stood transfixed. Not only was she bewildered by his closed-off inner dialogue, but his singular beauty overwhelmed her. She’d never before thought of a man as beautiful, but the man in front of her embodied the word. It wasn’t just his lean form or that the cliché “tall, dark, and handsome” seemed to exist for the sole purpose of describing him. There was something else. Something primal that oozed from his every flawless pore.

Though she hadn’t responded to his parting words, he gave her a brief smile, turned and headed toward the store.

“You, too.” She found a mousy squeak of voice a few beats too late. With a sigh, she climbed into her Jeep and turned over the engine.

As Reese made her way home, she turned the odd encounter over in her mind. She’d been too flustered to ask the raven-haired stranger the reason for his curiosity or even his name. A tingle of unease raised goose bumps on her arms. His insight had been remarkable. What had he said? *You’re not crazy*, or something like that. And how did he know there were gray wolves in the area when Blinky had laughed at the notion?

More confused than when she’d set out this morning for answers—and comfort food—she reached for the brown paper bag in the passenger’s seat. A large grease spot had formed at the bottom of the bag, but it only made its contents more desirable. The first bite of pie melted in her mouth, drowning her racing thoughts in chocolaty goodness. Once she got home, the only thing she planned to contemplate further was her pillow.

* * * * *

Reese noticed something was off the moment she pulled up the cabin. Swathes of blackish smears marred the length of the porch and front steps. A strange lump sat inert on her welcome mat. About the size of a small melon, it slumped over as if giving itself to the flies that buzzed around it. Though she knew not why she should be afraid, adrenaline coursed through her veins and sped up her pulse. What fresh oddity awaited her on the stoop?

Pulling together her courage, she opened the Jeep's driver side door and looked around. She heard no whispers, no nefarious thoughts waiting in the cool shade surrounding her land. Still, she walked toward her cottage with trepidation. One foot in front of the other.

The metallic scent of blood greeted her before her eyes registered the gruesome sight. Sticky, coagulating blood and a trail of innards. Part of the fur on its face had been peeled back, hanging like an abandoned latex mask, and exposed the muscle beneath. An empty eye socket cast its unseeing stare at her. Though she tried to avert her gaze, anywhere she looked brought fresh horror. Its abdomen gaped open wide and one hind leg dangled, hanging on by only a thread of ligament.

What had this poor thing been in life? A rabbit, perhaps a large squirrel—some beast had ripped it to shreds and left it on her doorstep. Reese wondered not only what had done this, but why? Why had this grotesque carcass been dropped here? Or dragged here, as the blood smears indicated.

She worked to overcome her repulsion and instinctive fear as she headed around back to the tool shed and selected a large metal shovel. After scooping up the mangled creature, Reese headed toward the wilder sections of forest that edged her property. With a sincere apology, she flung the dead animal as far from her cabin as she could. Shivers and nausea darted through her at the sound of the carcass's dull thud against the ground.

Thirty minutes of scrubbing later, the porch showed no trace of sanguine gore. Now, if Reese could only scrub the memory from her brain. The animal's missing lower jaw gaped at her each time she closed her

Hour of the Wolf by CJ Elliott

eyes.

After collecting her cleaning supplies, she headed inside.

Bitch, a gruff whisper reverberated around her mind.

She turned and scanned the woods for movement. Not a rustle. No one. Or no *thing*. She tried to convince herself it was her damned imagination again, just like the encounter the night before. Right. Just like the night before.

Exhausted, she resorted to a double dose of valerian and melatonin after a hot shower. Tonight she would sleep, come hell or high water.

* * * * *

Hellish yelps and growls tore into her dark slumber.

Too much melatonin? Vivid dreams. Wildly vivid dreams...no, not a dream.

Struggling to swim up from the blackness of her unconscious mind, she worked to focus on the alarming sounds. Yelps, growls, snarls—these were the sounds of pain. Reese stumbled downstairs, the sounds growing louder. Out front, the combatants fought.

Still bleary, she jerked open the front door and flicked on the porch light, though light from a waxing moon filtered through oak and maple leaves. Teeth bared and hackles up, two enormous canines charged each other—one silver, one jet black. These were not Huskies, nor were they red wolves. Blinky be damned, these were two gray wolves, and massive ones at that.

On impulse, Reese picked up the shovel from the stoop and rushed into the fray. Malice. It came off the silver one in waves, not so much specific thoughts, but apparent to her nonetheless. The midnight-colored wolf proved cloudier, his mind a blank void, like insulation that absorbed all sound it encountered. Something about its calm in the midst of this raging storm assured her the silver wolf presented the greater threat.

Like a golf pro swinging away on the driving range, she drew back the shovel and cracked the silver wolf in the mouth on the upstroke. The animal's only reaction to the strike was to turn his rage on her.

Hour of the Wolf by CJ Elliott

Bitch, the word came at her again just as it had earlier in the day.

Slashing an arc around her with the shovel's blade, she fought to keep the enormous animal away from her, but no amount of violence on her part seemed to deter it. Its advance continued despite the many blows she landed. No blood, no outcry. She seemed unable to wound the wolf. What nightmare come to life was this?

Crouching back on its haunches, the silver wolf prepared to pounce at her. Reese stumbled backward, over the porch's bottom step, losing her footing. Pain cut into her back as she fell across the stairs. She braced herself to the impending attack, but at the moment the predator sprang, a flash of black streaked in front of her. This time shrieks and guttural emanations came from both animals. And from Reese, though thanks to the ebony wolf, she remained uninjured.

The sound of torn flesh, howls of agony, ragged breath. She tried to make sense of the wolves tumbling over each other but couldn't tell which held the upper hand. A chilling, high-pitched cry of defeat ended the brutal fight. Dragging a leg behind it, its mane wet with blood, the silver wolf made a wounded retreat. The black wolf turned to Reese; heavy breaths rasped against the sudden quiet.

Safe? it asked without words.

"Yes," she answered aloud, too shaken to question how she could hear this animal's thoughts.

The wild dog swayed and then collapsed onto its side.

Unafraid of the wolf, she rushed to the fallen creature. Its sides heaved, tongue lolling to one side. She noticed a chunk from its—from *his* neck missing. And blood. So much blood. A surge of adrenaline compelled her to action. She broke for the cabin at a full sprint.

Trying to sort out the events she'd just witnessed, her mind pumped as fast as her legs. Not one gray wolf, but two. And they could communicate with her. And the one she'd tried with all her might to wound remained uninjured until the other interceded. Nothing made sense.

Reese Emmerson, she thought. *Professor of English Lit at Mary Washington University. Four twenty-two Princess Anne Street.* If she could

Hour of the Wolf by CJ Elliott

recall the mundane details of her life, then she must still be in touch with reality, right?

A hurried trip into the house yielded a first aid kit, a blanket and a towel. She rolled the towel and secured it against the neck wound with an ace bandage to staunch the blood flow. As gently as possible, she moved the wolf onto the blanket and dragged him into the house. He made no objection, though she knew the trip must've been painful.

What to do now? Should she call animal control?

No, the wolf interjected. No more outsiders. Please.

"Uh—okay," she said. "But I'm not sure I know how to help you."

Yes, you do, Reese Emmerson, professor of English Lit. Thank you for your kindness.

Now how the hell did this animal know her name? The answer to her question did not come. The wolf's mind fell silent. Too silent, she worried.

She worked quickly to clean, treat and properly bandage the wounds. Though he hadn't regained consciousness, the wolf responded to the pain of alcohol applied to the gash on his neck. Once finished, she covered him with a blanket; despite the warmth of the night, it felt like the right thing to do.

Patient assessed and attended to, she sat down on the floor beside him. She pressed an ear to his chest and stroked his back. The ebony fur slid under her fingertips, softer than she'd expected it to be. Though she was far from being an expert—hell, she'd never even had a pet growing up—she thought his heartbeat sounded strong, his breathing regular. Those must be good signs. His body heat and rhythmic exhalations lulled her into a peaceful slumber.

* * * * *

A pack of four magnificent wolves stood atop a crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains, identical in their large stature, all with piercing ice-blue eyes and inky fur distinguished only by a different shaped blaze of white on their chests. A tickle of wind distracted Reese; she turned away from

the pack for a mere second. When she turned her eyes back to the mountainside, the wolves had disappeared. In their place stood four exquisite men, bare from the waist up. Each had hair black as night, milky skin marked only with a tattoo on his chest. Long, sinewy muscles covered thick frames, and the eyes...they were the same piercing eyes she'd seen on the wolves. These were men of power—it emanated from them like heat radiating from the sun. Each man faced a different compass point.

The one turned toward the north bore a swirling tornado tattoo. The man facing south had a raging river drawn over his left pec. The brother—somehow she knew they were brothers, whether it was the remarkable resemblance or just something she sensed—the brother who looked east wore the mark of the rising sun.

The last brother drew her attention, the one who faced west. It was the beautiful stranger she'd met in town. The man who'd told her there were indeed gray wolves in the region.

He walked toward her, body fluid, but tense at the same time. Reese tried to speak, but he put a gentle finger to her lips.

She ran a hand over his sculpted chest, over the tattoo of a star-dappled, moonlit sky. *Matéo*, he introduced himself without words.

The impulse to kiss him washed over her, and she didn't fight it. On tiptoe, she brushed her lips against his. Dipping his head to help span the difference in their height, he pulled her into a deeper kiss. Her synapses crackled with primal electricity.

He swept her hair from her neck, kissing a trail from her ear, down to her collarbone. Reese melted against him, her body reacting without input from her brain. His bare skin transmitted warmth through the thin jersey fabric of her shirt. And then the shirt was no longer between them, their legs and arms tangled together. He filled up her senses—his feral scent, the taste of him.

With every caress, images flickered behind her eyelids. *Matéo* standing amid a legion of wolves. Flashes of faces shifting from canine to human and back again. Soldiers, families, elders, masses of followers gathered around him, teeming with adulation and obedience.

She reeled with sensory overload. Sights, sounds, scents until there was only him. His body against hers. His mouth roaming over her, tongue licking at her breast. He slipped a hand between her thighs. Reese was ready; she parted her legs and—

And?

Her eyelids parted; she saw blurry white light.

Flicker of darkness.

Blurry white light.

Wakefulness chased away the sensual imagery. Sunlight cut a swath across the room. She blinked, trying to process the scene change though the fog of sleep slowed the transition. This was her bed, her curtains hung around the window. Startling upright, she realized she wasn't alone. Matéo lay next to her, beautiful as any dream...and naked as a jaybird.

She looked down at herself. Still clad in a T-shirt and sweats, she tried to understand how she'd gone to sleep downstairs, next to a wounded wolf, and somehow woken in her own bed with a nude stranger. Reese jumped off the mattress and tumbled to the floor with a loud thud. A second later, Matéo peered down at her.

"Did you hurt yourself?" he mumbled, his voice hoarse from sleep.

Reese struggle to catch her breath. "What...? How...?"

Unapologetic about his current lack of clothing, he sat up and stretched. Every movement tensed muscle groups along his torso, all of which rippled under his skin in sharp definition. He extended a hand to help her up. "I thought we might be more comfortable here."

"But..." She trembled, pointing at him.

"Oh. You mean you didn't know? I thought because you can share thoughts that you understood."

"You were a wolf last night." Reese scrambled to her feet without his help.

"Yes." He climbed out of bed and morphed into the raven-colored wolf and then back into human form. "And now I look like a man."

Reese stumbled backward, bracing herself against the dresser. Her heart threatened to pound out of her ribcage, and her legs turned to jelly. A thin sheen of perspiration dampened her skin, though she felt chilly.

Hour of the Wolf by CJ Elliott

Putting a shaky hand to her lips, she struggled to calm herself, but an increasingly loud hum in her ears only increased her anxiety.

He grinned much like she imagined he would grin at an unintelligent child. "I wouldn't usually spring this on an outsider, but like I said, I thought you knew."

She shook her head and ran a hand through her tousled hair. "No. I didn't know. I could hear you and...and the other one sometimes. But not all the time."

Questions overwhelmed her as she tried to process what this man had said. Or whatever he was. Could she call him a man? And the other one, the silver wolf, was he the same?

"No, he's not at all like me," he answered her unspoken question. "Unless you mean *loup garou*. In which case, yes, he is." He paused, as if to listen. "Yes, *loup garou* is kind of like a werewolf, though I've never thought of myself in that way. Maybe if we were of English descent we might identify with the word *werewolf*, but we're a group of Acadians who migrated south, from Canada."

An annoying sensation drew her attention, almost as if her brain had grown ticklish. Was that him, picking through her gray matter? The feeling set her teeth on edge. "Stop, please. I'm not used to someone, you know, reading me."

"I'm sorry. You're thoughts are open, so I figured"—he shrugged, certain parts of him jiggling— "no problem."

Reese spun around, her cheeks set afire by a sudden awareness of his full frontal nudity. "Just put on some clothes and then we'll talk."

She stormed out and had made it to the bottom of the stairs before she realized she might not have any men's clothes in the place. Well, there were the pants and T-shirt she'd stolen from her ex. The jeans, she loved the baggy way they fit. Jefferey, not so much.

"Thanks for that," Matéo called from above. "I was beginning to think I'd have to wear something of yours. Which would be awkward for obvious reasons."

"Stay out of my mind!" she responded.

"Right. Sorry."

An intense headache formed over her brow. What the hell was going on? There were perfectly reasonable explanations for such vivid hallucinations. Moldy rye flour, LSD in the drinking water, a complete psychotic break. Any one of those things made more sense than what appeared to be happening. She made her way to the kitchen for a cup of tea. Or perhaps a double bourbon.

His heavy footsteps plodded downstairs and into the kitchen behind her. "You aren't hallucinating."

Reese shot him a dirty look.

"I'm sorry. Last time, I promise. Unless you invite me into your brain. Like last night." He smiled and raised an eyebrow.

Her cheeks flushed again. "I? What? No, you just wormed your way in. That wasn't me last night, mister."

"My apologies. I must've misread your lips against mine."

Reese drew herself up, posture as straight and indignant as she could muster. "I can't help what my dream-self does."

"Right. I forget. Humans are...*different*. To be honest, I haven't had much contact with your species. We try to keep ourselves separate."

Separate? Separate how? And why had he and the other one shown up at her doorstep? Setting a kettle on the stove, she asked. "What brought you here now?"

"The lone wolf. Sully is his name."

"Is that the silver wolf?" Her hands shook, clattering a pair of porcelain cups together.

"Yes. May I?" he reached for the teabags and cups.

Placing the items on the counter, Reese backed away. Her head pounded harder and her thoughts slogged around her head, all white water and foam.

"Why don't you sit down?" Matéo put a gentle hand on her shoulder. "It's a lot to take in, I know. But I'm grateful for your courage. He's much stronger than I expected a drifter to be."

Her eyes flicked up to his sinewy neck. Not a mark on it. "What happened to the bite?"

"It's still there." He poured hot water over the tea. "What happens

to one form, doesn't happen to the other. That's why I shifted last night once I'd built up the strength. I'm healthier and stronger this way. For now. Usually the wolf is more powerful."

He was doing it again. Answering questions before she had a chance to voice them, but she didn't bother to scold him. Instead, she took the steaming cup he offered. "Oh. Why did the other one come here?"

Shadows passed over Matéo's face as he sat down; his blue eyes were now closer to the color of stone. "He murdered my sister and two other females in my clan. He's looking for a mate. It's the same reason he offered you his fresh kill yesterday. It's his clumsy way of trying to impress you. And when you rejected it...well, he's responding like an upset child having a temper tantrum. Given his size and sexual urges, he's fully mature, but there's something not right about his mind. I suspect he's been alone since he was very young. Without a clan to socialize him, he has no reason to understand the rules of our kind. Or yours for that matter."

His lips touched the edge of his cup and he took a tentative sip. *Too hot*, he said silently.

"That's awful. I'm sorry about your sister. And the others." Reese stirred a spoonful of honey into her tea. "Why did he hurt them?"

He took a faltering breath and began to tell his story.

The first body had been found six months ago, Corinne, a female from the southern edge of Matéo's territory. She'd been disemboweled and abandoned near a creek bed not far from a clan settlement.

The scouts sent to investigate came back with reports of a foreign scent in the area. Eight weeks of tracking the intruder's trail yielded little. Just random stories about a drifter who called himself Sully, who sang love songs to the trees, and who thought in *English*. Very odd, and definitely not one of Matéo's people. He didn't seem to have a clan of his own, and he'd shown himself only a couple times prior to the murder on the edge of town. Also once in Corinne's backyard.

Then, the granddaughter of a clan elder went missing. Strange events had preceded the disappearance, mainly dead animals left on her doorstep and an unfamiliar scent when she came home in the evening.

She'd left word that she was heading to the family compound and was never seen again. Not until her putrefied body turned up two weeks later in the woods forty miles away.

After more digging, the scouts turned up more missing women, both human and *loup garou*. Rumors spread of a madman, supposedly looking for a mate, but who ended every life he touched. The rumors about this predator extended as far west as Nevada—well beyond Matéo's reach. He wasn't connected with any clan on the continent; at least none claimed him. Perhaps shame at having created such a monster prevented them from owning up to casting out Sully, which helped to create the beast. A pup left on its own to fend for itself, well, it wasn't the natural order of things. No wolf could form a proper sense of morality if isolated. But no matter how he'd reached his current pathetic state, the mangy cur had started hunting in Matéo's domain and having done so, signed his death warrant.

Aware of all this, the moment Anaïs found a gutted possum on her porch, Matéo's sister took the danger seriously. She was staying with Matéo when she was murdered. Sully had somehow slipped onto the grounds while she was out for a walk in the northern meadow. She'd specifically chosen the path because it bordered the guard wall. He'd torn out her throat...and disfigured her face to the point that Matéo had to identify her by scent. Rage hardened his face as he recounted the memory of the murderer's stink on her, too.

"He murdered her while she was protected?" Reese asked. A lump formed in her throat. Would Sully return for her? "Is he going to do the same to me?"

"No. I assure you he won't." Steel flashed in Matéo's eyes.

She shifted in her chair, awash in conflicting emotions. "What's going to happen to him?"

"I think you know the answer to that."

She did. Still, she couldn't help but feel sorry for Sully. It wasn't his fault he'd turned out broken and rejected. Was it right to blame Frankenstein's monster for fulfilling his destiny?

"It's sweet that you feel sorry for him, but I assure you, your pity is

misplaced," said Matéo.

"You just can't keep out of my head, can you?" She took a small drink of tea.

"Really, I *am* trying. But you cast your thoughts into the air; they're open and free for anyone to come along and pick up. Don't think of it so much as me entering your mind. I'm just collecting what you put out."

"Well, I can't help it either. I'm not very good at blocking out the whispers, and I've never attempted to quiet my own. I never had a reason to before."

"You're saying you hear others' thoughts all the time?" He chuffed a humorless laugh. "By the Gods, no wonder you're constantly questioning your sanity."

"It's not funny. And I can shut a lot of it out. Only very desperate cries break through. But at night..." She rubbed her eyes. "That's when it's hard."

A light touch to her cheek with the back of his hand and his expression changed. Something like concern, tinged with curiosity. "It must be hard to be so unique among your own people."

Tears prickled along the edges of her eyes, but she refused to give into them. She thought again about Sully and how she and he were not so different. "It is what it is."

"You aren't like him," Matéo said. "He's damaged beyond repair. You're not damaged. Not at all."

For so long, she'd been sure there was something wrong with her. As much as her parents had tried to keep her childhood calm and normal, it'd been far from normal. Ordinary experiences that other people took for granted were foreign for Reese. Untenable. Though she'd pretended for as long as she could remember that a "normal life" didn't interest her, her bravado fell short of erasing her true wants and needs. A life partner, a family of her own. These were aspirations basic to the human heart. How, then, could Matéo look into her heart and soul and not see the damage inflicted by years of unfulfilled needs?

You're not damaged. Not at all, his words echoed inside her. And she knew he meant them. The sincere phrase cracked through the dam of

emotion she'd held in place for so long, and the tears she fought to hold at bay streamed down her cheeks.

She'd told herself she didn't need anyone. With her "ability," she'd never been able to withstand a long-term relationship. God knew she'd tried, but every negative thought, every unspoken harsh word came through to her loud and clear. It was the same with friendships. So hard to trust other people when they rarely said what they wanted to say. With very few friends and no hope of ever having a family, she'd given up on meaningful connections with anyone else.

Matéo edged closer to her and pulled her into the strong shelter of his arms. He didn't shush her or lie to her and say everything would be all right. Not even with his mind. His thoughts were, in fact, sealed off; they had been most of the morning. Reese wept not only for her loneliness, but also for the quiet. The blessed, sweet, beautiful quiet.

When the storm of tears had passed, his thumb wiped away the strays and he touched his forehead against hers. His breath smelled like tea and honey, and heat rose off his skin like fog from dew-covered grass. Just as she had in the dream, she leaned into him, unable to stop herself from kissing him. And just as he had in the dream, he responded by deepening the kiss.

His arm like a cradle, he slipped to the floor with her beneath him. His full weight would've been too much for her smaller frame, but he braced himself over her. Just enough of his heft pressed against her, pressed between her legs.

Large, soft hands sought out her bare skin, pushed her shirt over her head. Following his lead, she stripped him of Jeff's tee. Like a horsetail flicking away a bothersome fly, the stray thought about Jeff shooed from her mind, her focus drawn completely to Matéo. Only Matéo. His heated skin, the taut feel of his arms, his abdomen against hers. Apparently he could do more than just read her thoughts. He could manipulate them.

Engulfing her mouth, his lips parted. Teasing swipes of his tongue as though he were trying to taste her. And she took in his taste. Beneath this honeyed kiss, she picked up a flavor too rich to describe. Something fecund and complicated. Something masculine, but unlike any man she'd

ever experienced.

Her fingers tugged at the accursed button fly to his jeans. With a savage yank, he ripped open the durable fabric, pieces of buttons skittering across the kitchen tile. She pushed down her pajama bottoms, lest they meet the same fate as the blue jeans. His rigid cock burned against her hipbone. Stroking it, she explored its girth and length. A visceral smile broke through his intense expression. Clearly, he'd picked up her silent appreciation for his erect member.

She licked her fingers and wet his cock, ready to slide him inside her.

"What's the rush?" he admonished. Again, that naughty smile.

May I? he asked, somehow gripping her wrists without using his hands.

Yes, she replied though her body had answered for her by softening its posture.

Again, without laying a finger on her, he pushed her hands over her head, her body splayed out for him. He fell upon her, as if to feast. His tongue ran along each contour, every fold of skin until he'd tasted every inch of her. She squirmed, unable to move, aching to touch him.

Soft lips brushed between her legs. Kisses burned a trail from her knee to the folds of skin between her thighs. She moaned, pebbles of anticipation dotted her skin. His hot mouth laved at her nether regions, his tongue plunged deep into her. With exquisite suction and heat, he drew her to the edge of coming, and then stopped. And his mind released her body.

Suddenly able to reach out for him, she grasped a handful of his jet-black curls and flipped him onto his back. His throaty laugh reminded her of a growl. She impaled herself on his hard cock. He groaned and pushed his pelvis against her thighs, gripping her hips.

As they moved together, he seemed to partake of her whole body, not just the space between her legs. He filled her abdomen, her chest; she breathed him in. And she lost herself inside of him. More than just his mind. His blood coursed through her and hers through him. She clung to him, afraid of becoming lost, but the feel of his arms around her brought

her back to the pleasure of the moment. His hand stroked along her bosom and down her torso, but somehow cupped her face as well. The intensity of so many sensations broke within her. She cried out in the throes of an almost unbearable orgasm. Every inch of her skin caught fire, and she held onto his quaking form.

Filled with lightness and high from what she'd shared with Matéo, she felt as though she floated down from the ceiling, much like a stray feather cast out from her pillow. Her pillow?

Her body came to rest against the softness of her bed. Still cradling her, Matéo cleared his throat. "I thought we might be more comfortable here."

"That was..." She touched her fingertips to her mouth. "Wow."

His chest shook, and she knew he was amused by her choice of words. "Happy to please."

Warmth stirred inside her again—the touch of his mind. She wiped the sweat from her forehead. "I need a minute, Matéo. Just a little rest."

"As you wish." The heat inside her mellowed, but he remained there with her, moving through her and over her like warm ocean waves. But despite all he'd shared with her, she felt his thoughts streamlined, simplified as if he didn't want to overwhelm her.

Only a singsong verse played in a loop, over and over in his mind.

Le soleil et clair de lune

Le lait de la mère, les jeux des enfants,

Bonheur et l'amour

Bannit la nuit méchante.

"What's that?" she asked. "What's it mean?"

"Rough translation: Mother's milk and child's play; sunshine and moonlight; oh, happiness and love; banish forever wicked night. It's a little poem we teach our children."

Reese furrowed her brow. "After making love, you think of nursery rhymes?"

"No." He nudged her. "I was just thinking about your problem. And how much you must dread nighttime. The nursery rhyme, it's something our mothers teach us when we're afraid of the dark."

Hour of the Wolf by CJ Elliott

"That's funny." She touched the tattoo of the night's sky on his chest. "I would think werewolves wouldn't be afraid of the dark."

He pursed his lips. "I would imagine *were*wolves wouldn't be. As for *loups garoux*, on the other hand, darkness can be just as scary for us. Things going bump in the night and all."

"I was just kidding."

"I know, but really humans have some ridiculous misconceptions about my kind."

Cowed by his outburst, Reese made a terse reply. "I'm sure."

"I mean, seriously, why would we have to rely on the full moon to shift into lupine form? And silver bullets? Your species has an overactive imagination."

"Okay, okay." She threw her hands in the air. "I'm sorry I made the joke."

"And I'm overreacting, aren't I?" A smirk cracked his serious expression.

"Just a tad."

He kissed her cheek and pulled her body against his again. "My apologies. It's kind of a touchy subject."

She gave a playful eye roll. "I can see that."

"What were we talking about?"

"Nursery rhymes...?"

"Right. I was thinking about the rhyme because of your predicament. I mean, no wonder you're out here all alone. It's probably the only place you can get a good night's sleep. All those...what do you call them?"

"Whispers," she murmured, as if the word pained her.

"Right. See, *loups garoux*, we're born with the same ability, but we're taught early to control it. To close and open our minds. To block out or let in the thoughts of others. I'm pretty sure no one was able to teach you how to get a handle on your gift."

"Gift, ha!" She shook her head. "One person tried to help me. She was the only person who figured out what was really going on with me. But she's gone now. And the things she taught me, they help to a point,

but not when I'm asleep. Never when I'm asleep. Then, everything gets in."

Matéo's lips brushed her shoulder. "You must've been terrified as a child."

Reese nodded, her throat constricting. "Dr. Kate taught me to treat the whispers like a radio. Each person has their own frequency, so to speak. I've learned for the most part how to tune in to one at a time. Sometimes I can even turn the 'radio' off, but my unconscious mind can't do it."

"Well, your friend was right to a point. It is like a radio, but more like a two-way radio. You have to turn off your transmitter as well as your receiver."

"Okay, you lost me in all that metaphor."

"It's like I was telling you earlier." He laced his fingers in hers. "You have to close off the outgoing chatter as well as the incoming."

"And how to I do that?"

"Well, there are a few different ways to do it, but I find the easiest is to focus on thoughts that draw you inward, like a mantra or trying to remember the lyrics to a favorite song. Something like that."

Reese looked toward the ceiling and tried to remember the words to the first song that popped in her head—a Duran Duran hit. At first, nothing seemed to change. In fact, Matéo hummed along and laughed.

"*Hungry Like the Wolf?*" He grinned and cocked an eyebrow at her.

"You know it?"

"How could I not? The damn tune was stuck in everyone's head in 1982."

She wrinkled her nose. "Sorry. It's all I could think of."

"It's all right. Go with it."

She started over, focusing on each individual word. By the time she reached the second verse, she had to concentrate in earnest to recall the lyrics. And then, the shift happened. Her mind closed up like the seal on a Ziploc baggie, the click seemingly audible in the air around them, and then silence. An almost tangible void enveloped her.

"Still thinking of the song?" Matéo asked.

"I am. And you can't hear it?"

"Not a peep. And you can't hear me?"

"Not at all!" She threw her arms around his neck. "Matéo, this is fantastic. But how do I keep it up while I'm asleep?"

"If you fall asleep with your mind closed, it should stay closed while you sleep, but it might take some practice. Until then, I'll be happy to co-pilot for you." A protective squeeze reinforced his statement.

"You can do that?"

"Did anything disturb your slumber last night?"

"No, but—" She chuckled. "But we can't do that every night."

He kissed her softly. "Why not?"

Why not, indeed? A surge of arousal and affection coursed through her at the thought of him with her every night. Panic and doubt discolored her excitement, but she pushed them away. She wanted to stay with him now.

A kiss brought her back to the moment. His breath against her neck sent shivers through her. Though his body hadn't entered hers yet, she could feel his spirit inside her, igniting the same torturous heat as earlier.

"How do you do that?" she asked in a raspy whisper.

"It's easy. You're open to me."

Matéo pulled back the physical affection and stared down at her, caressing only her face. An incredible tautness gripped her body. He made love to her with barely a touch; pictures that played through her head controlled her corporal reactions. An image of his mouth suckling at her nipples, and the rosy skin at the tips of each breast drew into tight buds. A flash of his cock teasing her opening, and her nether regions grew moist. Her body was his playground, and he played with abandon. She clung to him, shaking and wracked with pleasure. And he knew how to get her there, any time he wanted.

After what seemed to be hours lost in his embrace, Reese dozed off in Matéo's arms. But if she'd expected the same sweet dreams from the night before, she was soon proven wrong. Sully stalked around her sleeping brain. The wild, savage desperation in the wolf's eyes frightened her. And she was surprised to find that part of her sympathized with the

lone wolf. He was still out there, and though Matéo's presence kept any real fear at bay, she knew Sully represented a real threat.

Why can't you just go away? Leave us alone, she asked.

You hear that, Téo? Your bitch doesn't want me to kill you. Or you to kill me. The words startled her. So much anger, and, yes, so much damage in Sully's voice.

Her eyes fluttered open, her heart pounding in her ears. Matéo lay awake, body tense, gaze fixed somewhere far away.

"I'm sorry. I'm not so good at shutting off the transmissions, yet," she murmured.

"It's not your fault. He's a predator and he won't stop."

She turned her face against his chest. "Do you have to kill him?"

"Yes." No hesitation and no thought.

"Can't you just scare him off?"

"That would just make Sully one of my brothers' problem. He murdered members of *my clan*. He owes a blood debt to *me*. He's my responsibility to deal with."

"Is it weird that the thought turns my stomach?"

A gentle hand stroked her hair. "No, it's not weird. It's the most normal thing in the world."

She'd have to take his word for it. What did she know about normal? Still, questions and apprehension plagued her. "Have you killed before?"

He remained silent, even his thoughts. Reese couldn't pick up the slightest whisper, but his heavy exhalation told her more than any confession could. Matéo kissed the top of her head. "You should get some rest, *ma chère*."

Discussion ended, Reese napped more, Matéo standing guard over her subconscious. In the late afternoon, they shared a simple meal of apples, bread, cheese, and wine.

She had so many questions—about Matéo's world, how all this would play out, if she would see him again after they parted. But she didn't ask. For the first time in her life, she'd come to know another person who was an enigma, someone who harbored private thoughts. Funny to

Hour of the Wolf by CJ Elliott

think that for Reese to experience the dynamic of a normal relationship required a supernatural creature, a man made of myth.

Instead of questions about the future, she gave herself over to the moment and enjoyed his company for what it was—a beautiful gift. They talked late into the night about her life, her desires, her struggles. She knew he could've gleaned the information from her mind, but he took the time to unravel her, treat her like a mystery. Soon enough the soft lilt of his voice lulled her to sleep. This time, there were no dreams, only the knowledge that Matéo was there, by her side. Until he wasn't there any longer...

In the morning, when she woke without him by her side, she knew where he'd gone, though she couldn't connect with his mind. She said a small prayer for Matéo. And for Sully.

* * * * *

Reese's dream, the one she'd waited for, began with the sound of Matéo's panting as he ran over wild terrain. Each exhalation pushed out a gray cloud of condensation into the cool night air. Brushy vines and trees dressed in purple leaves whipped by; dried foliage crunched underfoot. She traveled with him, tracking the scent that offended his nostrils.

He ran without tiring for what felt like hours, but she didn't mind the journey. She could feel what he felt, see what he saw. His warmth filled her sleeping body, their consciousness commingled. Her thoughts were scattered, littered with questions for which he gave no answers. His mind stayed focused, always on his prey, always on the hunt. And on vengeance. Reese didn't really need to ask why he'd let her in on this particular chase.

Without warning, Matéo's hard pace slowed, and he struggled to control his breathing. An almost imperceptible rise in the landscape lay ahead. The ebony wolf drew air deep into his lungs. The murderer's stink had grown stronger.

Matéo circled the low hill and discovered a clump of branches that to the casual observer would've appeared as nothing more than

underbrush. But he knew it to be more. Finally, after months of searching, he'd found the monster's lair, in the middle of nowhere, in a patch of wilderness *les étrangers* referred to as West Virginia. The cur traveled far from home to find his victims. Again, illogical behavior for a lone wolf. Most kept to a small territory. But Matéo wasn't concerned about understanding the beast's behavior; he was only interested in ending it. Reese's stomach filled with lead as she read his intentions.

A familiar silhouette, made of jutting bones and long limbs, pushed past the den's doorway. The animal's mouth parted, and he licked his teeth.

"Téo, Téo, Téo. You shouldn't have come here," Sully sneered.

"And you shouldn't address me as if you know me."

"Touched a nerve, did I? What you going to do about it, now that your bitch isn't here to tickle me with her shovel?"

Rage put up Matéo's hackles, and a growl rumbled in the back of his throat. With a powerful leap, he lunged at Sully and latched his teeth onto the nape of Sully's neck. The silver wolf pulled away, leaving a chunk of himself in Téo's mouth.

Before her eyes, Sully morphed into his human form, but instead of the same frailty present in his lupine body, he materialized in a stocky, solid body. Shorter than Matéo's human stature, Sully was built no less powerfully. A squarish head seemed to connect to his shoulders, barely a squat neck separating the two. Bulky pectoral muscles led to thick, rippling arms, but it was the appendage at the end of each arm that was the most terrifying. Not quite hands, but not fully claws, knife-like protrusions extended from each finger. He repelled the black wolf's attacks with ease.

Stunned and bleeding, Matéo shook his head. This shouldn't be. He'd never met a creature such as this before. No *loup garou* was stronger as a man. Téo certainly wasn't. If he was to survive this, he'd have to outthink this fiend of an opponent. He made his retreat farther into the forest. As he ran, he searched. There had to be something here he could use. Then, he saw it; now, he'd just have to draw the beast to him. He cast out false images of himself weak, blood gushing from several wounds.

Hour of the Wolf by CJ Elliott

Lying down near a cracked and broken tree, he waited.

Sully didn't try to cloak his footsteps or quiet his laughter. *Téo, come out, come out wherever you are.*

Matéo whimpered in response.

Your bitch fought me more valiantly than this, Sully went on, a wicked grin on his lips. Your sister, too. She got in a few good licks before I ended her. You know, at night, in my bed, I can still hear her exquisite screams.

Though he was desperate to taste more of the cur's blood, Matéo forced his muscles to keep rigid, forced the howling storm inside to calm. Focus on the endgame. The match would soon enough be his.

Across the clearing, the monster turned toward his prey and began to run, picking up unnatural speed with every step.

Téo's mind went quiet, but Reese knew the wolf's next move.

Wait for it, her dream-self whispered to him. *Wait for it.*

Large eyes open wide and teeth bared, the beast closed in on Matéo. Ribbons of frothy saliva dripped from Sully's taut lips. Arms and talons extended, he launched himself at what he'd been convinced was a fallen adversary. At the last second, Matéo sprang to the side. Unable to stop, Sully hurtled toward a sharp broken branch. It was thick enough to withstand the impact.

Crunch! She heard the sickening sound of the branch ripping through flesh, muscle, and bone. Thankfully, she didn't view the impalement. Matéo had spared her that vision.

She felt his caress on her cheek. *Now, ma chère, you're safe. We're all safe.* Weak and patchy, just a flicker inside her—no doubt due to exhaustion—Téo's spirit receded.

Drenched with sweat, she startled awake, her heartbeat erratic against her ribcage. Flashes of the dream choked her, but she knew it was no dream. Reese wrapped her arms around herself and wept.

*

A wad of keys cooled Reese's palm. The weather had turned chilly in the last two weeks. Her walk home from the university had been brisk. Autumn had pounced on Fredericksburg in the month and a half since

she'd returned from the cabin.

Reese opened her front door and walked through her foyer, too absorbed by a handful of mail to see the usual Louis Philippe-style credenza or carved, spider-back chairs. Still sorting through the envelopes, she flopped her laptop case onto the floral print sofa and entered the kitchen.

Of all the rooms in her house, she loved the kitchen the best. Granite countertops and light cherry cabinetry made it feel warm, even on the coldest of nights. And speaking of night, dusk had changed the clear blue sky to a deep shade of purple. When daylight savings time disappeared next week, there would be even less day to enjoy. A familiar dread gripped her, though now the feeling was more of an emotional echo than any real dread.

Abandoning the bills and junk mail on her desk in the kitchen's office nook, she clicked on a stained-glass Tiffany lamp. It washed the surrounding area in a warm glow.

She sliced an Asian pear and poured a glass of port. The fruit's complex flavor and crisp texture mixed well with the musky liquor. Settling into her office chair, she booted up her PC and munched on the pear. She had papers to grade, lectures to refresh for next week, but the paper she'd worked on for the past two months beckoned to her. It explored the usage of lupine shape-shifter lore in contemporary fiction, focusing particularly on a local tale of four brothers, each who inherited a piece of their father's domain. They'd been groomed since birth to take over leadership of the largest clan of *loup garou* in an area that once was the English Colonies.

After researching the legends, she realized why Matéo had been so annoyed by the Hollywood version of wolf-men. Though traditional werewolf stories did imbue the creatures with immortality and a dependence on the full moon to change shape, ancient *loup garou* mythology spoke of a different species of shifter. First of all, the ability wasn't a communicable condition. One either was *loup garou* or one was not. There was none of this contagion-by-bite nonsense. And they could change at will; the full moon had no bearing on their ability to assume

either the lycan or human form. Not to mention that they weren't immortal. Tripling the outer limits of a human lifespan, they could live for centuries, but they could become wounded or sick or die an untimely death. That they happened to have a stronger physical and metaphysical fortitude than ordinary people or wolves had perhaps given rise to misconception of immortality. *Loup garou* tended to keep their existence hidden from *les etrangers*—as non-shifters were called—considering the species inferior.

Perhaps for good reason, Reese mused. She knew firsthand how people treated others they couldn't understand.

She thought about her last night with Matéo at Smith Mountain Lake. He'd left without a word...or a whisper. Finally, someone who could tell her lies. Or at the very least commit the sin of omission, something she couldn't wait to taste again. Winter break at the cabin couldn't come fast enough.

Pushing aside the intoxicating memories, she forced herself to focus on her work. After a couple hours, she prepared a Waldorf salad and finished the simple meal with a cup of herbal tisane. A glance at her watch told her it was bedtime. Her seven o'clock morning class would roll around all too soon.

She washed her few dishes from dinner and switched off the lights downstairs. Up in her bedroom and master bath, she washed her face, brushed her teeth and changed into soft, faded PJs before sliding between the sheets.

A smile parted her lips as she thought of her now favorite Duran Duran song and recited the lyrics in her mind. Soon, the heat she expected warmed her and a familiar scent filled her nostrils. *His* scent. And his blue eyes blazed behind her closed eyelids.

Good night, Téo.

Bonne nuit, ma chère. He wrapped his strong arms around her.

She hadn't yet mastered closing her mind to the maddening world, but even if she had, she knew he would be there. Always inside her, banishing wicked night.

Author Bio

CJ has been a writer for as long as she's been able to hold a pencil. After several years as a technical writer, a vivid nightmare inspired her first published story—"The Wedding Feast." She writes horror, suspense, and thrillers.

CJ grew up as a military brat. During her childhood she lived in North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, Texas, Hawaii, Jamaica, and Virginia. Currently, she and her family call Northern Virginia home. Visit her at <http://cjelliottbooks.com/> and explore her contemporary romances and erotica at <http://cindyjacks.com/>