

NINTH MOON

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A NOVEL



BY BUD SIMPSON

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Nature's Way: Birds of the Hills: Vol. 1

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For Margo and Denise,

Also, for that little Werewolf named Lupita, "Little Lupe,"
whom I met at the old Los Angeles Zoo.
I hope she is still communicating.

If being a Werewolf is really a curse, you've got to treat it
honorably. If Werewolves are going to carry on, there
has to be an incredibly powerful force. There is the
business of the craving, the hunger for the kill.
It has to be deeply pleasurable and more than
an appetite for meat. There has to be a
sensual dimension to it.

Glen Duncan

Do not fear the night. Instead, summon the wolf
inside you and welcome the darkness
like it is home.

Nikita Gill

NINTH MOON

By Bud Simpson

INTRODUCTION

ONE DAY, WHILE I WAS in the U.S. Navy, way back in the olden days and stationed in Long Beach, California, a shipmate of mine asked if I'd like to take a trip up to Los Angeles with him. He had always wanted to visit the zoo up there. That was okay with me. I liked wild animals, also. This was back in 1958, so we caught the Red Car, a glorified electric trolley or train system, now extinct, and headed for the old Los Angeles Zoo in Griffith Park. That zoo itself is now extinct, also. It's been replaced by a more modern and up to date facility. But, even in those early days, it was a reasonably well stocked zoo.

We wandered around a while, and he went to look at an animal I wasn't interested in. I walked to where the monkeys were and was amused by their antics for a time. In the shade of a tree, I noticed a thin, almost tiny, dark-haired young lady sitting on a bench with her eyes closed, but not asleep. She seemed to be either humming or reciting some sort of mantra. At times she looked as if she were in pain.

I walked over to her and asked, "Are you okay?"

Her eyes popped open; very dark brown eyes, and softly said, "Yes. I'm just communicating."

I should have just said, "Oh, okay. Have a nice day," and walked off. Instead, I asked, "With who?" I know. *Bad English!*

"My family," she answered.

My eyebrows raised a bit as I asked, "Are they here?"

"Oh yes. They live here."

In my mind, I thought they must be employees who lived on site. "Really? Where?"

"In the wolf area."

Bud Simpson

I never seem to know when to quit. "*In* the wolf area?"

She looked as if she had a bad stomach cramp, moaned a bit louder, and said, "Shh! I'm listening."

To my credit, I didn't say a word. I didn't even ask a question. She nodded her head a few times, looked up at me, and said, "My name is Lupita. It means, little wolf. They call me, Little Lupe. We're wolves."

At that point, I decided I *was* listening to one of LA's famous nut cases. I excused myself, and found my buddy. I told him about my strange conversation with a lady who thinks she and her family were wolves.

"Werewolves, huh?"

"What makes you think that?"

"She told you so. She said, 'werewolves,' didn't she?"

"No, no! She said, 'we're wolves.' We're wolves, two words, *not* werewolves."

"Prove it," he replied.

So, this book was inspired by a strange little lady named Lupita, who either thought her family were wolves or ... Werewolves! If I had been braver, I might have hung around a little longer and found out which.

PROLOGUE

THE EERIE HOWLING STARTED SHORTLY after the full October moon had risen. At first, it had unsettled Pete Lukas and had brought an icy shudder to his body, prickles to his skin, and chills to his spine. But then he thought, *"Don't be stupid! That's what you're here for. To prove there actually are wolves in Northern Maine. Besides, when was the last time someone in Maine had been killed or eaten by a wolf? Never before, that's when. If these are wolves, you're probably in no danger. Quite possibly, you'd be more apt to get your ass ripped off by your next-door neighbor's Rottweiler or Pit Bull than a wild wolf. Right? Probably. Of course, you're not in danger."* That phrasing of his fears inspired more confidence within him and brought a stronger conviction to his mind.

Besides, you damned idiot, you're sitting here with your back up against a huge, granite, glacial erratic that's eight feet tall. No wolf or anything else can sneak up behind you, and you have a really nice size campfire blazing in front of you with plenty of wood next to it. Everybody knows wolves are afraid of fire, aren't they?

Plus, setting there, right beside your right hand, is a Smith & Wesson .38 revolver loaded with pure lead hollow points specially cast for you by your friend, Guy LeBeck, a damn good gunsmith. He guaranteed that after a couple of inches of penetration, those suckers would flatten out to about an inch in diameter. It would turn into a mini-Frisbee, skitter around inside the wolf's body, bounce off all hard body parts, and probably wouldn't even come out the other side of the wolf. All the bullet's energy would be spent inside its body. A wolf will drop in its tracks like a wet goose turd, so he said. Sounds good, anyway!

Good sounding words at the time, but right now, with a full moon shining and possible wolves ahowling in the distance, Pete had to admit to more than a little trepidation despite his friend's words of confidence.

To prove his point, Guy LeBeck had shot one of these "special leadies" (that's what he called them) into a plastic

Bud Simpson

gallon bottle chock full of water. Spectacular! The thing blew up as if the bullet had been filled with TNT! So, Pete had bought a box of them. But, was it against the law in Maine to shoot a wolf, even though the state has never claimed they actually still exist here? Law, schmaw! If he got attacked by wolves, it was him or the wolf! Bye, bye, wolfie! Besides, he'd say he thought they were just big Coydogs.

Brrr! Pete shuddered. There was that howling again. What is there about a wolf howling at a full moon that sets your skin to prickling and makes your body seem to shrink? Pete laughed to himself ... or, *at himself*. *Watching all those damned werewolf movies when he was a kid, that's what!*

Again, the mournful call eased itself between the trees and through the cold night air and into Pete's waiting ears. The howls, or moans, or whatever they were, seemed to be farther away, this time. *That won't do. That won't do at all! If you want to prove a wolf exists, you have to see the friggin' thing! With your own damned eyes, too. A wolf moving away from you sure wouldn't do the trick. Stick with the plan, you effin' moron. Answer the call!*

Pete cupped his hands to form a horn-shape of sorts around his mouth, took a deep breath, and ... coughed. Cold air suddenly going deep into your lungs can make you do that at times. Of course, wolves don't answer coughs, so he tried again, hoping the cough hadn't scared them farther away. This time he concentrated and spewed out a pure, mournful song that he was so full of sex and love, he was sure no self-respecting wolf could ignore it. He waited about three or four minutes and repeated his message. He had "learned" these wolf calls from a CD that a buddy of his had copied from the internet. Pete cocked his head in the general direction from which he thought the wolf's call had come. He cupped his ears with both hands and held his breath.

Hot damn! An answer! Maybe his buddy knew what he was talking about! It didn't seem any closer, he thought. He tried again. Almost instantly, the answer came back. Aha! The

friggin' thing is interested. He waited to see if it had anything else to say. But, no second call.

Un-cupping his ears, and re-cupping his mouth, Pete sent out the most mournful and sexy wolf call he could muster up. A moment later, an answer from the wolf in nearly the same tone of voice. Ha! He thought, I must be speaking the same language ... whatever-the-hell it is. What did he say? Who cares, as long as he gets an answer. And ... it was *definitely* closer that time.

Pete reached for the digital camera he had borrowed from another friend, Hal Ouellette. He had explained to Hal what he was going to do with it. Catch a shot of a wolf, probably at night. No flash, if possible. Didn't want to scare the wolf away. His friend had set the camera up for night shooting. Pete knew less about photography than he knew about speaking wolf. Hal had explained everything about the camera to him, but it still made no sense at all to him. Just set the friggin' thing up so all I have to do is point it at the wolf and, click, I got a picture of it. I don't want a National Geographic, prize-winning portrait of the friggin' thing, just a picture to prove it exists. Over-exposed ... under-exposed ... I don't give a shit. Just identifiable is all I want, Pete had said.

Okay, Hal had answered. I got the lens set at its largest aperture and it's set on an ISO of 16000. It's got a fully charged battery in it. I don't guarantee a thing, but if there's any light around at all, you might get something. Try not to shake when you squeeze the shutter. And ... don't forget to turn it on first!

So, Pete set the camera in his lap, turned it on, pulled the .38 closer to his hip, and sent another mournful message out into the dark skies to his unseen friend. There was no return answer. Twice more, still no answer. It seemed as if a half-hour of silence followed. Pete's shoulders sagged with dejection as he thought, *Damn! He's gone.*

He didn't know why he was thinking of this wolf as a male. Just sort of seemed like it must be one. Then, a short howl, more of a mumbled, mournful moan than a full howl,

Bud Simpson

that seemed to come from no more than a hundred yards away! Not only did his skin prickle with icy fire, this time he was suddenly paralyzed with fear! Why? Hadn't he talked himself beyond that scary point a half hour or so ago? *Because here you are, moron, up in the Northern Maine wilderness, twenty miles from nowhere, and you got a friggin' wolf coming to visit you! That's why! Show some spine here. You got all bases covered!*

Pete sat very still. Should he call again? He decided against it. If that thing was as close as it sounded, it could probably smell him by now, anyway. He checked the smoke from the fire. For sure, it could! The smoke was definitely drifting on a slow, steady course in its direction. Best to just sit still and keep the old ears and eyes on full alert. In spite of telling himself all was taken care of, Pete had to deliberately force his body to relax. It was so tense, he had started to tremble and a sharp, fiery burst of adrenalin coursed through him. It caused his back to tighten and arch slightly. It was a full five minutes before his misbehaving body was somewhat relaxed and under control again.

Snap! The sharp sound seemed so loud it shattered the night, but Pete knew it was just his nerves that made it sound that way. Then, a rustling of leaves! Something moving ... definitely!

Pete stared intently into the darkness beyond his fire. Another slight crunch as a heavy foot snapped a small twig to his right. A slight sighing, wolfish moan to his left! And then ... dark movement in the deep shadows straight ahead of him!

Jumpin' jeezly kee-rist! There's three of 'em! He only wanted one, but he had three! Pete almost said it out loud. Then, directly within the deep shadows dead ahead of him, the movement he thought he had detected flickered a bit and then solidified into a definite form. A wolf-form? As it moved its head back and forth, looking left, looking right, quick glimpses of glowing, green flecked, yellow eyes beaming back the light from the campfire sent intense chills up his already chilled, overworked

spine. Excited, scared, elated, and (almost) joyful, a big smile split Pete's face. *Damn-it-all-to-hell-and-back! It is a friggin' wolf!*

Camera! Camera! Where's that damn camera? Get a picture, quick! His hands were shaking so badly, he almost couldn't pick the damn thing up when his fumbling hands finally found it! Then, almost as if the dark form knew what Pete wanted, the big wolf took another step farther out of the shadows and stared with exacting concentration at him. Pete peered through the viewfinder and framed the wolf in its center. He pressed the shutter. A slight click as the exposure was made, and Pete thought, *History is made here tonight!*

What about the other two? Without moving his head, he slowly moved his eyes right, and then, left. The big wolf in front of him was a very dark color. Hardly light enough to separate it from the gloom around him. *Maybe he's a black wolf.* As he peered at that wolf, the other two eased slightly closer to Pete and towards the wolf in the center. As nearly as Pete could tell in the dark, the other two were a more normal gray in color, except the smaller one on his right. It was lighter; maybe even white. The three wolves stared at him ... even more intently now. He slowly set the camera down beside him. His right hand slid down to his side and rested on the gun.

That motion caused the black wolf to stiffen. Instantly alerted, it muttered a low rumbling growl, as if it knew what a gun was used for.

"Okay, okay, big guy! I won't pick it up. Unless you guys don't behave yourselves," Pete said sotto voce.

What the hell was he doing? Muttering to a pack of wolves as if they knew what in hell he was saying.

He smiled to himself. The wolves relaxed noticeably. Pete resumed the one-sided conversation. "Would you guys get pissed if I took a group photo? No? Okay. I'm moving slowly here. Relax guys."

He moved his eyes and hand towards the camera, grasped it easily this time, no shakes, and raised it slowly to his eye. The three wolves just barely fit into the picture's frame. The ones

Bud Simpson

on the edges were almost touching the sides of the future photo. *Damn*, he thought! *Wouldn't it be great if this were on the cover of National Geographic?* He pressed the shutter button and, click, the wolves were immortalized on zillions of pixels. *Ain't progress great*, he thought.

Pete's intestines picked that moment to rumble loudly and the wolves alerted to that low thunder by stiffening their bodies. "Hey, don't worry big guys! Just my gut. Won't hurt you at all. Mind if I have a sandwich? Ain't eaten for hours waiting for you all to get here."

Again, moving his hands in slow motion and keeping his eyes on his new friends, Pete retrieved a bologna and Swiss cheese sandwich from his day pack. The wolf pack's three sets of eyes followed each slow move Pete made, but didn't show any other reactions. "I'm gonna eat this thing now. Don't get upset, okay?"

He raised a half of the sandwich to his mouth and bit off a piece. As he chewed, the big black wolf settled down onto its belly, feet forward, just like a house pet, and watched intently as Pete chewed. The two other wolves seemed to take this relaxing of the guard as a sign that they all could do likewise, which they did. When Pete saw this happen, even he allowed himself a little release of tension. Suddenly, the sandwich tasted delicious to him. He finished the first half of the sandwich and started on the second half.

He took a bite and stopped. Had he heard a tiny whine ... almost a whimper? Like from a dog who wanted a bite of what his master was eating? He chewed and swallowed the bite. The leader of the pack licked his lips and Pete could see it swallow! Any damn fool could see what that meant. He moved the sandwich away from his mouth and smiled.

"Hey, Big Guy. You want a bite?"

The wolf seemed to smile (at least in Pete's mind). He broke off a piece of the sandwich, and said, "Okay, Big Guy. I'm gonna toss this over to you. Don't get bent out of shape by

me moving faster than a friggin' snail, okay? Get ready, here it comes."

Pete glanced down quickly to make sure he knew where the gun was (you never knew *what* might happen with a wolf pack, right?), and flipped the piece of sandwich near the black wolf's front feet. The wolf froze and Pete could see it get slightly tense. Then, it leaned forward slightly and sniffed the air near the sandwich. A quick, sudden head and shoulder mini-lunge, and the sandwich disappeared like magic.

"Whoa! I take it you *do* take bologna from people. That's great! Tell you guys what. I still have a couple more sandwiches here. I'll divide 'em up so's you *all* can have a bite. Okay?"

Without waiting for an answer, Pete carefully retrieved the other sandwiches from the pack. He unwrapped them and laid them on his lap. He carefully flipped a half sandwich to each wolf so that each piece landed about a foot or two in front of each of the wolves. He wanted to draw them a little closer so he could get a better look at the pack. It worked. The Big Black Guy snapped up his piece with a loud, CLOP, as his jaws slammed shut. The other two inched forward and inhaled their pieces as well, but not with the noisy enthusiasm of their leader.

"I guess you all like my food, hey guys?" Pete was talking in a normal tone of voice now, and it didn't seem to bother his wild friends. Then he has a stupid idea. Even in his own mind, it was stupid. But everybody has those once in a while, right? What if he could get the big guy to take food from his hand? These wolves were behaving exactly as his friend's German Police dogs would have. Wolves are nothing but big, wild dogs, aren't they?

Knock off the stupidity, Pete! The voice rang as loud and clear as the pealing of warning bells in his mind. *Well, I'll just make sure there's plenty of sandwich sticking out so he doesn't take my hand along with it! That should work. Besides, I know damn well, a wild wolf probably won't eat out of my hand. They'll probably take off when I move closer, anyway. This is just a little scientific experiment, that's all.*

Bud Simpson

Pete broke a half-sandwich in two and got onto his knees ... slowly. No sudden moves, even though these guys (and gals, too, maybe) didn't seem frightened of him now. He started inching forward on his knees with the sandwich held at arms length out in front of him. The black wolf sort of cocked his head a little as Pete slowly inched his way in its direction. It didn't move a muscle or seem to get tense, so, Pete moved closer still.

Pete's hand was so close to the wolf's muzzle now that he began to feel a bit nervous. Not much, just a tad. He kept up a soft one-sided dialogue as he stared at the wolf. He was looking directly at the wolf when it happened. He had not seen any reaction from the creature, nor did he actually see it move or even see it prepare to move, but as if by magic, Pete's hand, along with the sandwich, was entirely inside the black wolf's maw!

Pete froze and the prickles were back, in spades! All over his body! His prickly body was so stiff from fright, that if he wanted to move it, he couldn't have! He heard the other two wolves moaning and sighing on each side of him. Then, he realized a strange thing. The Big Black Guy had not bitten him, it was merely (merely?) holding his hand tightly in its mouth. Very tightly! So tightly it was a bit painful.

Then, it was over as quickly as it had happened. A quick tiny shake of its head, and the wolf released him. Pete fell backward, helplessly splayed out on the ground. The large black wolf stepped forward and hovered over him, blocking out everything above him. Pete felt it staring down at him and could feel its hot breath on his face. He was now certain he had made the biggest mistake of his soon-to-be, short, stupid life! He closed his eyes to the inevitable, crossed his arms over his face and waited for his fate. It was sure to be a most painful fate. Being eaten alive by a wolf pack would be the very last way he would choose to spend his last day on earth! He started to whimper.

Then, he heard yelping and loud, almost joyful, howling and yowling. It was then that he realized the pack was leaving him! The howls grew farther away and he allowed them to fade into silence and nothingness before he dared move his rigid body or open his eyes. He saw stars above him, not blocked by the Big Black Guy's head and body! Relief now replaced the millions of needles probing his body, and he rolled over onto his knees. He crawled back to the safe side of the fire and piled a half-dozen more sticks onto the blaze. Sparks flew into the air like a small tornado, rising up through the flow of heat as the blaze grew in size. The bigger the better! If it was true that wolves didn't like fire, this one was sure to scare them off.

After he stopped shaking, Pete sat down again by his day pack. He shuddered at his naiveté ... and sheer stupidity! What in hell had he been thinking? *Not thinking at all, you stupid bastard! Not thinking at all!* He filled his lungs with a deep, deep breath and slowly let it out. That deep breath felt wonderful to him. Especially after thinking breathing was no longer an option less than fifteen minutes ago. He felt himself relaxing as the warmth of the fire seeped into his body.

Then he laughed and shook his head. An encounter with a wolf pack in, of all places, the Northern Maine woods, and he had survived it without a scratch! Well, not exactly without a scratch. His hand did have slight bleeding from a scratch when the wolf had shaken its head before it let him go. All he had lost was a drop or two of blood. No problem there, right?

Little did Pete Lukas know, as he looked at that tiny spot of blood on the top of his hand, that this seemingly minor scratch had changed his whole life in a way he could never have imagined. Not in his *wildest* dreams!

CHAPTER

1

PETE WOKE UP WITH A start. It was still dark, but the fire had died down to mere embers. The frosty cold of late fall was seeping through his clothing, replacing the warmth from the fire. At first, he didn't know where he was. Then it hit him like a lightning bolt. Wolves! He looked around quickly. Nothing of that nature met his eyes. A quick glance at his watch showed it to be six-fifteen. Morning was here. He shuddered and shook the sleep from his head. A bad dream? No way in hell had it been a dream ... bad or not!

Pete stood and stretched the stiffness from his body. Another quick glance about and he walked the few steps to what was left of his firewood. He grabbed a flat piece and used it as a shovel to push the glowing embers into a pile. Then he laid the stick of wood on it. The others quickly followed. He fanned the embers with his hands and soon the dry wood began to burn and crackle. He tossed a few handfuls of dry moss and scraps of birch bark onto the small flames and soon, the campfire was comfortably ablaze again. The heat from the renewed fire felt especially good on this cold, Maine morning.

The sky was still bright from the remaining full October moon, now pushing off into the western sky. The false dawn was lighting up the eastern sky now. In another hour, it would be light enough to see the trail and walk back to his car. He shook his head again and smiled. *Wait until his friend sees those photos! What a surprise is in store for him! That guy had never believed there could be wolves in Northern Maine. Or, anywhere else in Maine. Wolves were history here, as far as he was concerned.*

Bud Simpson

Pete picked up the camera and turned it on. *Damn. How do you bring the pictures up? Stupid, stupid, stupid!* The one important thing he hadn't learned. *One* important thing? How about almost every important thing! He should have paid more attention to his friend when he was explaining all that digital camera crappola. Oh well! Didn't matter. They would both be seeing the wolves together as soon as he drove home. A few more hours wouldn't make any difference.

Pete yawned widely and stretched again. He wasn't really sleepy, just a little weary from last night's adventure. An "adventure-of-a-lifetime" adventure! As soon as he heated some water and had a steaming cup of hot, instant coffee with a few heaping teaspoons of sugar in his gut, he's be wide-eyed and bushy-tailed again. Just like those friggin' wolves were last night. Wow! He still couldn't quite wrap his mind around what had transpired.

As soon as his coffee was ready, he impaled a few pre-cooked sausages on a pointed green stick and held them over the fire. When they sizzled, he pulled them away and let them cool for a minute. Then he ate them right off the stick. *Gourmet cooking*, he thought. Too bad he couldn't do that with eggs. Those sausages could have dropped right into the fire, come out covered with ashes, and still been gourmet cooking to him at that moment. Anything cooked out in the open over a campfire always tasted great. Maybe it was the almost festive mood he was in that added flavor to them.

Pete let the fire burn down to embers and ashes. That took an hour. *Perfectly timed*, he thought. He pushed the embers to the center, poured the remaining water from his canteen over it, and ground the ashes into the ground. He kicked all combustible materials away from the soaked ashes. Satisfied that the fire was a goner, he packed up everything into his daypack, tucked the precious camera into an inner pocket in his jacket, shouldered his pack, and headed down the trail to his car. An hour's hike, possibly more, and he'd be out of there and on his way home.

It took less than an hour. Maybe he had been invigorated by what he had been through. He glanced at his watch. Thirty-two minutes! And he wasn't even breathing hard. He had just been loping along, and suddenly, it seemed, there was his car. Loping along? He hadn't been aware of his pace at all. Just a pace that seemed natural to him.

Hub! How about that? Oh well. It's not every day you meet a wolf pack.

Pete slipped the pack off his back and laid it next to his car. He looked down the road and the full moon was still visible near the horizon in the steely-blue morning sky. He unlocked the vehicle, popped the trunk lid, and stowed his pack.

As he opened driver's door, he took a last look at the setting moon. A thrill went through his body at the sight of it. He smiled, and without even knowing why, he cupped his hands around his mouth, raised his face to the heavens, and released a long, loving, mournful wolf howl in its direction. He stood there for a moment. Then, another thrill passed through his body. In the far distance behind him, he heard a mournful answer ... in three-part harmony!

CHAPTER

2

IT WAS NEARLY A TWO-hour drive from Northern Maine wolf country to Guy LeBeck's gunsmith shop down near the mid-coast. LeBeck, Pete's friend of many years, was an exceptional gunsmith. He could build a gun from scratch if necessary. He specialized in old-style Kentucky rifles. Percussion guns that were authentic works of art and very pricey. A sign hanging on the front of LeBeck's house said, simply, THE GUN GUY. Everyone seemed to like the play on words. He had thought of, Guy's Guns, but it seemed rather ordinary compared to "The Gun Guy." Guy's shop was on the way to Hal Ouellette's house, so Pete stopped off at Guy's place first. He blew his horn as he pulled into the driveway.

The front door opened and Guy stepped through. He was slightly over six feet tall, and skinny as a rail, as the saying went. Bald as a cue ball, also. He was over fifty years old, the oldest of the trio of friends. If he ever ran afoul of the law, his description alone probably would have him picked up in a very short time. He was unique in appearance.

"Hey, Pete! How did it go? Get a shot of that phantom wolf of yours?"

"Phantom my ass! Real as they come. A big black beauty and two gray buddies. One of them liked me so well, he tried to take me home with him."

Guy laughed. "Looks like you weren't that tasty. Musta spit you out."

Pete laughed at that one. "Not too far from the truth, old buddy. Tell your old lady you're going over to Hal's place with me. I'll show you the pictures of the wolves when we get there.

I can't figure out how to bring them up on this friggin' camera of his."

"You never were very mechanically inclined, Pete. I had to show you three times how to flush the toilet before you could do it at least three out of five times by yourself."

"That a big exaggeration, fella. I can do it almost a hundred percent of the time now."

"That's great! There's hope for you yet. The wife's not here. I can actually leave without her permission during her absence."

"Ooh! The feeling of power that must give you, you hen-pecked bastard. Get in here then. Oh, don't forget to close the front door before you go. If she ever came back and found it open, you'd be in deep poo-poo."

"Thanks for reminding me. You know how forgetful we old guys are."

After locking the front door, Guy got in the car with Pete and they drove the quarter of a mile to the Hal's place. Pete pulled into the yard. Hal was a freelance photographer by trade and made a decent living at it. Signed prints of his wildlife photos and fairly regular photo jobs paid the rent and allowed him to eat a little, too. They got out and he and Hal walked to the house. Hal had been waiting for Pete. In spite of his disbelief about Pete being able to actually get a photo of a real wolf, he was curious to hear what Pete's night in the woods had been like. He opened the door at their approach and said, "Come on in fellas. Got coffee waiting for you."

"You're always the gentleman, Hal," said Pete. "That's why I brought Guy along. His wife can't make coffee worth a shit."

Hal cuffed Pete up beside his head and knocked his hat off. "Hey," yelled Pete. "Knock it off. You know I'm right."

Hal laughed. "Yeah. I know you're right, but don't let the whole world know. Other than coffee, she's a fantastic cook."

"True, true. I was only joking about her bad coffee. If you bought her a decent brand, she might be better at it, though."

Bud Simpson

Hal smiled and said, "Maybe. Man does not live by coffee alone, Pete."

"Get the hell in here you guys. I'm anxious to hear about last night. Any luck at all, Pete?"

"I'm about to show you how wrong even a smart guy like you can be, Hal." He reached into his inner pocket and drew out Hal's borrowed camera and handed it over to him. "Proof positive is in that little piece of electronic wizardry. You won't believe your eyes, Hal."

"You mean, you actually got a shot of a wolf? For sure?"

"As the uncouth of this world might say, you're effin' right, I did."

"That's implying that you're among the couth? Hard to believe, but let's take a look. Gather around."

Hal turned the camera on. "Have you seen them yet, Guy?"

"Nope! Pete here doesn't know how to bring the pictures up to view them."

Hal shook his head. "Come here, numb nuts. That's you Pete. I know it's a complicated procedure, but I'll show you again. First, turn the camera on. To bring up the stored photos, here is the procedure. Watch closely. You make your pointy finger point. Like this." He held his hand up so Pete could see his extended index finger. "Then, you touch this button right here, and push. And then, voila! Pictures appear!"

Pete blushed a little. "Yeah, yeah. Make a fool out of me. Go ahead. But, I didn't know the magic word."

"Magic word?"

"Yeah! *Voila!* Only you friggin' frogs know that word. We ordinary people don't."

Guy and Hal were laughing hard. "Okay, now that you know the magic word, let's see what you have here. How many did you take?"

"Well, I think four or five. I was pretty excited. I don't remember exactly."

"Huh! What does this first one show me?"

Pete leaned over for a better look. The display showed a dark background and two greenish streaks slashing diagonally across the screen. "Shit," said Pete. "I musta moved my hand. Those streaks are the big black one's eyes. Let's see the next one.

Hal brought the next photo up. It was better than the first one, but just barely. No blurring, but all it seemed to show was a granular dark shadow in the center and a lighter shadow on either side of it. One of the lighter side shadows seemed to have glowing spots where the eyes should be. Detail was totally lacking. Hal tried to bring up more images, but none were there.

"I thought you said you had four or five pictures on this thing. All there are, are these two."

"I thought I took more, but like I said, I was excited and a little scared, too. I guess I didn't take as many as I thought I had."

Hal shook his head. "I should have spent more time on this with you. Look. If you had used the flash instead of available light, this second picture probably would have turned out okay. Let me ask you a question. Would you rather have a dozen photos that don't really show a whole lot, or a single shot that was crisp and clear?"

Pete sighed. "You know the answer to that. I was just thinking a series of shots. Yeah. You're right, Hal. Right now, I'd want one nice clear shot. I wasted all last night. Who knows if I can ever find those guys again."

"Tell you what. I'll load these shots onto my computer. Maybe I can fool around with them and bring out a little detail that might tell us something about what these animals are. The state these pictures are in right now doesn't show us anything definite. Okay?"

"Sure, Hal. I appreciate it. But, I'll tell you one thing, they are definitely wolves. They were way too big to be even coyote hybrids. I've heard coyotes yowling around at night and these

Bud Simpson

things sang like wolves. They did *not* sing like coyotes. Wolves are what these things are."

"Maybe so, Pete. Maybe so. However, you *knowing* this, isn't actual proof that you can put your finger on and say, 'Look! this is a wolf!' Okay. I believe that *you* are sure these things are wolves. But there are more doubters out there than true believers with credentials. You gotta convince a few experts, Pete. With actual proof."

Pete's shoulders sagged. He had a hangdog look on his face. "Okay. I wanna come around sometime when you're not busy. Show me how this damn camera works with the flash. I'm going back up there in another month or so. Who knows. Maybe I can call them up again."

"You don't give up easy," said Hal. "That's good! Believe me. It's easier taking a flash shot than the way you wanted to do it. Give me a call. Meantime, I'll frig around with this stuff you got. Who knows what I can do with them. I'll give you a call when I'm through."

CHAPTER

3

THE PHONE RANG VERY LOUDLY. At least, to Pete it sounded very loud. He must have turned its volume up at some point and didn't remember it. Actually, all of his senses seemed sharper now after his trip up north. Hearing better was only part of it. Colors seemed more vivid. Food tasted much better, and smelled better, too. His vision seemed more acute ... at least with moving objects. Maybe he had gotten much colder than he had realized and it had perked up his senses. Anyway, he wasn't going to complain about it. He reached for the phone and said, "Pete here."

"Hey, Pete. Hal here. Look, I fooled around with that second photo of yours. I lightened up the shadows and middle tones and increased the contrast some. Then I sharpened it up a bit. Not high-tech stuff, but now I sort of agree with you. At least that these things aren't coyotes or coyote crosses. I'm no animal expert, but they look more like wolves than before. Not definitely wolves, but looking more like them."

"Wow! Do you mean they definitely, maybe, possibly, could be, wolves, or that they probably are?"

"Don't be a wiseass, wiseass! All I mean is you still need better photos of these mystery animals that sound like wolves to you. Are you serious about heading back up there soon?"

"Well, not too soon. Maybe in three weeks or so. I've got to travel out west to my sister's place. She's getting married and said I had better be there or else. I think all she wants is the wedding present. Just joking, Hal. I know you had a thing for her once. Yeah, after I get back, if it's not all snowed in up north, I am definitely going back up there."

Bud Simpson

"That's great! You really have my interest now. If I were going to be around then, I'd beg to go with you. But, I've got a money-making job in Costa Rica. I'm going down there to shoot humming birds. I'll probably miss most of the Maine winter this year. As near As I can tell, I'll be gone three months. Don't you feel sorry for me?"

"Yeah, sure," said Pete sarcastically. "I'll be thinking of you while I freeze my balls off up in Northern Maine while possibly, maybe, shooting pictures of possible friggin' wolves. Don't forget. Before you go, I want another photo lesson from you. This time, I'll pay attention and maybe actually learn something."

"Hah! That'll be the day. You still remember how to flush a toilet?"

"Of course. I'm so good at it now, that if they ever hold a toilet flushing contest in the Olympics, I might medal in it."

"Meddle in it, you say? Sounds like you."

"Watch your mouth, or I won't give you any credit in the story I'm gonna write about this. It would give a big boost to your flagging career, you know."

"Thanks. I'll remember that as I'm making a ton of money down in Costa Rica while lying on the beach sucking up Margaritas and ogling all those gal-filled bikinis."

"If a gal just fills a bikini, she's not worth wasting your eyes on. It's the ones who *overflow* a bikini that I wanna see."

"I can't argue with sound logic like that. I'll remember those words of wisdom as you're freezing off everything that hangs out up in Northern Maine. Drop by tomorrow for your photo lesson. I'll be pretty busy after that getting ready for Costa Rica."

"You got it, Hal. Thanks a lot. I truly appreciate your help. I'll try not to screw up this time. See ya tomorrow!"

"Okay. I'll be waiting."

Pete hung up and stretched his arms over his head. Hunger pangs reminded him that it was close to noon and he had only eaten a light breakfast. "Think I'll run down to the