

I had now been in Tucker's employ almost exactly one year. It was one of those muggy Oklahoma August evenings where any breeze seems only to add to the discomfort — like a big dog breathing hot damp air in your face. I was returning from an afternoon of prairie dog observation. My usual route to the barns took me past the main house. There I saw Tucker standing on the front porch, avidly reading the mail. This was unremarkable since, if the letters were few, he often read them the moment they arrived. But as I rode past, he suddenly growled, "What?" and tromped inside shouting "Jenny! Jenny!" I quickly tied up my horse and hurried after him.

I caught up with Tucker in the great hall by the python as Jenny was rushing from the kitchen to meet him, drying her hands on a dish towel, unspoken concern on her face.

Tucker waved the letter, which was several pages long, "Luddy's got himself hurt down in Louisiana."

She took the sheets of paper and started reading as she asked, "Is it bad?"

"*He* don't think so, but you know Luddy — looks on the bright side like a moth. Hurt his ankle is what. Didn't know sprained or broke when he wrote. But the smart Alec says he's gonna wait there for me to come down! Ain't even seen a doctor! And this letter's already —" he looked at the postmark "— a week old!" He threw off his overcoat and marched angrily into the library. Jenny and I followed.

Tucker paced fruitlessly in front of the cougar. "Blessed fool. Could end up lame, or lose his leg, or die with the gangrene. I'll send him a telegram in the morning. That's what. Tell him get back to New Orleans and —"

Jenny interrupted, asking quietly, "Did you read all of his letter?"

"Not past the blessed fool part!" Tucker never used blasphemy, no matter how angry he got.

Jenny maintained her low, steady tone, "You will want to go."

"What?"

"Luddy knows you will want to go. He is right." She proffered the letter. He snatched it back and continued pacing as he read, occasionally emitting his guttural "Pfhuh." Gradually he slowed down until at last he stopped, head tilting back, chin jutting out, lips pursed.

He seemed to notice me for the first time. "Whitney, good man. How long you been here?"

"Actually, I came in with you."

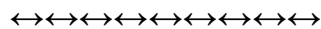
"No, no, no, how long you been here on the ranch?"

I had to think, then said, "About thirteen months."

"And we ain't once gone on one of them trips I promised."

"Well that's no matter," I offered, "I've had more than enough to occupy my —"

But he had turned away and was re-reading the letter. "Yeah, this one sounds better'n usual. You ever hunt werewolf, Whitney?"



The three of us sat close round a lantern on one of the library tables. An appropriately eerie wind had come up. It whistled, raked branches on the walls outside, and even inside coaxed a ghostly flickering from the lantern's flame. Tucker, his face lit orange, mustache

casting theatrical shadows up his cheeks, was giving us the details of Luddy's current adventure.

"I will say, reading a letter from Luddy is as good as standing there asking him questions and having him answer 'em, if you know what I mean."

"He writes a thorough report?" I asked.

"He does that. So, seems this little town down there, place called Sombre Foret, has had a werewolf worrying them for almost two years. First victim was killed that long ago. Two more have been killed since then.

"Some wolf or bear turned man-eater, of course."

"You don't have to tell *me*. But nobody can track it down. And it ain't like they haven't tried. Here's the part I like." He began to quote from the letter, "They tried many times after both the first and second killings to track the critter down. Every time, the trail led to the same big oak tree and was lost there. The finest hounds, brought in for the purpose, were unable to pick up the scent beyond the tree. The townspeople are certain it's because that is where the wolf changes into a man.

The last man killed was a volunteer, an expert 'coon hunter in his own right, who staked out the tree not too long before my arrival. On the third morning of his vigil, he was found killed on the spot, terribly mutilated, his gun drained dry."

Tucker sat back and snapped the letter with one finger. "Now that's pretty good, I'll admit."

"Good?" I asked, not bothering to hide my disapproval of his lighthearted tone. "What's good about a man being killed, if I may ask?"

"Oh, don't get all prissy. I read and hear about this kinda stuff all the time. I just mean that this situation is a lot different from most. Usually there ain't a shred of proof of anything. Anyway, Luddy goes on to say that he hired some dogs and tried to track the thing himself. Had to go it alone. Townspeople are a hundred percent cowed after that last killin' and won't even go out nights. Damn Luddy's gonna get killed himself huntin' alone like that, even if it's just a mangy lame bear."

"Well, he was not killed this time. What did happen?"

"Well, the dogs led him to the same big oak tree." Tucker again read from the letter: "They was running pretty far ahead of me and I heard them fighting before I caught up. And, Harold, blamed if they wasn't all three dead when I got there! Strong, seasoned dogs every one. Someone or some — " here Tucker hurriedly turned to the next page, " — thing had tore them up real bad."

We silently contemplated the admittedly spooky tale. Then I asked, "Was that how Luddy injured himself? Chasing the dogs?"

"Naw, tripped on the hotel stairs when he got back. Says a local Gypsy woman must've cursed him. Pfhuh!"

Tucker stared into the lantern flame. There was energy in his eyes, an alertness to his rigid body. For the first time since I had known him, he was genuinely interested. He shook his head, trying to resist, "Doggone Luddy. I said I'd never waste time on supernatural nonsense again."

Jenny had remained silent until now, "But we are going to Louisiana."

"That we are," Tucker nodded.