

CHANGES

By Lisa Timpf

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Gina Poirier pushed the puck ahead of her as she sped toward her opponents' end. She noted the *rasp, rasp* of winger Nora McNab's skates to her right and slightly behind her.

Gina deked past the defenseman and glanced up. The opposing goalie flexed her knees and wiggled her catching glove as if to say, *bring it on*.

Gina glided to her left, faked a pass, and watched as the goalie began to move across the net, in Nora's direction. Then Gina fired the puck into the open left side.

Nora approached with her hand upraised for a high five, and Gina saw her other teammates behind. She shot a triumphant glance at Coach Pellerin, who gave her a grudging nod.

Gina chattered excitedly to her mother all the way home in the car. "Maybe now I'll get more ice time," she said.

"Where was Katie Comeau tonight?" Gina's mom asked.

"Coach said she felt sick, couldn't make it," Gina shrugged and looked out the window. "That's why I got to play center on the top line."

"You did a good job, honey," Mom said, smiling. "Maurice would've been impressed."

Gina sat silent for a moment. Whenever he could, her older brother Maurice had always come to watch her games. This year, though, he'd cracked the lineup of the team in Moncton. over three hours' drive away from the Poiriers' home town of Aptaqatg in north-eastern New Brunswick. For the length of the hockey season, he was staying with their cousins in Moncton.

She felt happy for Maurice, but at the same time, she missed him. Of course, if he were sitting in the car right now, he'd be telling her all the stuff she'd done wrong. She could imagine it now. *You missed your check on the other centre on their first goal. You want to make the national team someday, you need to play hard at both ends of the ice.*

Gina sighed. Truth is, she'd been cheating a bit on that play, thinking her defense would chase down the puck and spring her for a breakaway. She'd gambled, and been wrong.

Katie wouldn't have missed her check, a small voice inside her insisted.

Yeah, but Katie wasn't there.

"You missed a good game," Gina overheard Nora say the next day at recess. Gina lengthened her strides until she caught up with her teammates.

"Yeah, sorry," Katie said, lowering her head. "I wasn't feeling well."

"Hey, are you okay?" Nora asked. "You look—"

Katie raised her head defiantly, and Gina saw the dark shadows under her eyes. "I look what?" she snapped, placing her hands on her hips.

That's not like Katie, Gina thought.

"Hey, whatever," Nora said, raising her hands, palm-out. She turned to Gina. "Let's go."

Gina shot a glance back over her shoulder, seeing Katie's sour look. Sure, Katie wasn't her favourite person. It wasn't because Coach Pellerin had put her on the top line—what irked Gina more was the way Katie acted as though she thought she was better than her teammates.

That aside, though, Katie seemed pretty easy-going, usually.

Something wasn't right with her, that was for sure.

Gina grimaced. Whatever it was, she hoped it would get cleared up in a hurry. To win the first round of playoffs, they needed everyone on their game—including Katie.

Friday night, Gina thought as she headed toward her room to get ready for bed. A whole weekend ahead, with no school. Plus, hockey tomorrow afternoon, the start of the playoffs.

Gina frowned. She found herself torn between wanting Katie to be back for the next game, and half-hoping she wouldn't be. *With* Katie, the team had a better chance of winning, and that mattered to Gina. The further they went in the playoffs, the more likely they'd attract the attention of scouts for the national development team. Ever since Micheline Audette from nearby Shippagan had cracked the Canadian lineup for the Olympics, Gina had dreamed about one day representing her country in international play.

On the other hand, Gina knew her performance the other night wouldn't be enough to convince Coach Pellerin to let her centre the top line if Katie showed up. And if she didn't get playing time, it'd be tough to impress any scouts.

Gina shrugged. If Katie showed, she showed. Nothing she could do about it.

"Hey, Gina," Mom called down the hallway after her. "Don't forget to clean your room. Remember, I asked you earlier this week," She paused, adding in a laughing tone, "If you don't, the *loup-garou* might get you."

"Yes, Mom," Gina replied. *Still on about the loup-garou.* She shook her head. She didn't mind, really. The story of the loup-garou was a harmless bit of folklore parents in New Brunswick had been teasing their children with for years. Gina had looked it up, once, on the internet. A legend, of course, with many different versions. The way her mother's story went, if you did something bad, you might get turned into the loup-garou, which usually took the form of a wolf. Gina had read that according to some legends, the loup-garou could be another creature, such as an owl or even a pig. Gina snorted. *Yeah, a pig would be pretty terrifying, wouldn't it?*

The unfortunate person who became the loup-garou remained human by day, but shifted form at night. The spell could last as many as 101 nights—*that's more than three months*, Gina thought with a shiver as she did the math in her head. However, the spell could be broken if someone drew the loup-garou's blood when the enchantment was in place.

Afterward, both people involved must be careful never to speak of the incident—or they would both turn into the loup-garou.

Someone must have had lots of time on their hands, to make up stuff like that, Gina thought, shaking her head.

Gina opened the door to her room and groaned inwardly when she saw the floor, littered with various odds and ends including a pair of rolled-up, dirty socks, her favorite sweatshirt, the paperback novel she was currently half-way through, and— She sighed.

Gina fired the dirty laundry at the white plastic clothes basket in the closet, one piece at a time, from different parts of the room, pretending she was playing basketball. She watched a pair of socks land within the confines of the basket and raised her arms in victory. *Poirier's hot tonight. Shooting 50 per cent from the floor*, she imagined an announcer's voice saying. She wadded up a dirty T-shirt and arched a shot toward the target. It hit the rim and flopped into the closet. Gina shrugged. *I'll get it later.*

When the dirty laundry had been dealt with, Gina tossed her book on the end table, stuffed a couple of articles of relatively clean clothing into her dresser, and piled an armful of odds and ends she didn't know what to do with in the corner of the closet.

There, she thought. *That should pass inspection.*

She'd just turned on the bedside lamp and settled in to read a few chapters of her book when she heard a tap-tapping on the window. Gina frowned, listening. No, not a tapping. The noise sounded more like a *scrrrritch*, as though someone were drawing their fingernails along a chalkboard.

Annoyed and afraid at the same time, Gina padded over to the window, peering out.

Two enormous yellow eyes looked in.

The eyes blinked.

Gina staggered backwards until she felt the bed behind her.

A big grey dog—no, make that a big grey wolf. A huge grey wolf. Gina opened her mouth to holler for her mom and dad when she noticed a glint of yellow, reflected by the nearby streetlight, around the wolf's neck.

Wolves don't wear jewelry, she told herself.

She tiptoed closer, craning to see but cautious not to get too close.

Yes, she was right. Around its neck, the wolf bore a gold chain with a heart-shaped pendant that dangled under its chin and bumped against its chest as it shifted anxiously.

Gina leaned closer. The wolf had something clenched in its jaws. As Gina watched, the wolf fumbled with the object, then pressed it against the window glass with its right forepaw. *A jagged-edged piece of boxboard, maybe from a cereal box*, Gina thought, intrigued. On it was written something, although the handwriting looked childish, as if penned by someone just learning to form letters.

Still, Gina could clearly make out the word written there.

HELP.

Gina straightened her shoulders and stood statue-still for a moment, warring with her fear.

This could be just about the dumbest thing you've ever done, she thought as she walked over to the window. *Well, maybe not so dumb*, she told herself. *I think I recognize that necklace*. Gina undid the safety catches and turned the crank to open it.

With one smooth leap, the wolf jumped into the room, and Gina cranked the window shut.

With a gesture of her trembling hand, Gina motioned toward the necklace.

The wolf nodded.

Gina reached out and grasped the heart-shaped pendant in her right hand. She turned it over and leaned forward to read the inscription. *To Katie. Love, Mom and Dad*.

Gina stepped back and struggled to reconcile what her eyes were telling her was real, with what her mind told her was impossible.

The wolf watched her, yellow-eyed and panting nervously. Gina eyed the long teeth warily.

“Can you talk?” Gina said, breaking the silence.

The wolf shook her head.

“Katie Comeau?” Gina whispered, feeling incredibly foolish.

The wolf whined, low in her throat, then nodded once, slowly.

Gina stood for a moment, thinking, arms crossed.

No wonder Katie felt ill. *If this is happening to her at night, it'd be hard to sleep, for sure—*

Another thought, unbidden, sprang forward. *If I don't help her, I'll get to play centre on the top line—*

Gina blushed bright red under the wolf's quiet scrutiny. *No*, she thought. *If I were in her shoes, I'd be desperate for someone to help me.*

But how?

The internet had said something—what was it? To cure someone of being the loup-garou, you had to take some of their blood—cut them, for example.

The idea made Gina feel dizzy. She always felt faint when she saw blood. She remembered the time at one of Maurice's games when there'd been a fight and blood from a player's nose had splashed onto the ice. Gina had almost passed out in the stands.

Besides, she hated hurting *anything*—when she found a spider in the house, she usually captured it with a tissue and placed it outside. What Katie was asking her to do—

"I can't," Gina said, spreading her hands. "You'll have to go somewhere else."

The wolf stepped forward, then cocked her head and looked toward the door. Seconds later, Gina heard a noise.

Footsteps, in the hallway.

Gina motioned toward the closet. The wolf leaped in, and Gina could hear her burrowing under the clothes on the floor.

Gina closed the closet door behind the wolf. Seconds later, a knock sounded on the bedroom door.

"Come in," Gina said, hoping her mother didn't notice the hoarseness in her voice.

"I came to say goodnight," her mother said. "Hey, it looks great in here. You did a nice job." She paused, rubbing her bare arms and shivering. "Did you have the window open?"

"I caught a spider," Gina said, squirming slightly at having to lie. "I let it out."

"Well, as long as you locked the window back up." Gina's mother smiled, then took a step toward the closet. Gina froze. *Uh-oh*, she thought as she watched her mother reaching for the knob.

“Uh, Mom,” Gina said, stepping forward. “I—uh—I may have just thrown a few things in there, to get them off the floor. I’d rather you didn’t look.” She paused, then added, in a rush of words. “I’ll straighten the closet out tomorrow. I promise.”

“Well—alright,” Mom replied, smiling as she dropped her hand back to her side. “Good night, then,” she said, her gaze lingering on the book on Gina’s bedside table. “Don’t read too late, okay? Big game tomorrow afternoon.”

“I know,” Gina said, stretching and yawning. “G’night Mom.”

Gina waited until her mother’s footsteps had retreated down the hall, then raced to the closet door.

The wolf poked her head out from her hiding place. “That was a close one,” Gina whispered.

The wolf nodded, then padded along the carpet to the foot of the bed. She stretched, then shook herself with so much enthusiasm that a few hairs floated free.

“Hey!” Gina protested.

The wolf hung her head, though her eyes remained fixed on Gina.

Back to the problem, Gina told herself, though she found the yellow-eyed gaze distracting, particularly when the wolf began to pant again, showing her teeth.

“Look,” Gina whispered. “You need to trust me. I need to draw blood, to break the spell.”

The wolf gave a low growl.

“I don’t like it either,” Gina replied. “But how can we do it?”

And will I have the courage to get close to those teeth?

Gina opened the top drawer of her desk, pulling out her jack-knife—one of Maurice’s old ones, a hand-me-down. She’d used it to whittle sticks, but this— Gina shook her head, panicking.

The wolf whined to get Gina’s attention. When Gina turned to face her, the wolf pointed with her nose at an empty pop can lying on the floor next to the trash container.

“Yeah, maybe,” Gina said, thinking of the time she’d accidentally cut her finger on a similar can. “We could nick one of your paw pads with it.”

The wolf lifted her right front foot. “Better use the other one,” Gina advised. “You’re right-handed, aren’t you?”

The wolf switched paws.

“Here goes,” Gina said. She moved the can until the razor-edged opening sat against one of the grey paw pads. She pushed. Nothing happened.

Harder, Gina told herself. She gritted her teeth and twisted the can, pushing as she did so.

Droplets of crimson blood oozed out of the paw-pad.

Then, suddenly, it was Katie and not a wolf sitting in front of Gina, with a dollop of blood rolling down her pinky finger.

“Band-aids in the bathroom,” Gina mumbled. “Next room over.” Then she passed out.

Gina came to, to find Katie peering down into her face.

“Found them,” Katie said, lifting her left pinky finger so Gina could see the Band-aid wrapped around it. “All good.”

“We can’t talk about this. Ever,” Gina whispered.

“Fine by me,” Katie replied. She hesitated. “Look, I know I haven’t been the best teammate—”

“Forget it,” Gina said, waving her hand. “I could have been better, myself.” She paused and bit her lower lip. “Maybe tomorrow’s game can be a chance for a new start.”

Katie nodded. “Friends?” she asked, extending her right hand.

“Friends,” Gina agreed firmly, reaching her own hand out to shake Katie’s.

The next morning, a rapping on the door woke Gina up.

“Come in,” she said drowsily, blinking as she checked the time. *9 a.m. I slept in.*

“Breakfast is ready,” Mom said.

“I’ll be right there.”

Gina swung out of bed and grabbed her robe.

What a weird dream, she thought, shaking her head. *But it felt so real.*

Gina looked at the carpet at the foot of the bed, noticing a bit of fluff on the floor. She bent down and picked it up.

Animal hairs. Grey ones.

Gina glanced out the window and gasped. In the soft earth under the window, she could clearly see paw-prints mingled with marks left by running shoes.

Gina smiled as she made her way down the hallway toward the kitchen. *Nothing to stop Katie from showing up for tonight's game.*

To her surprise, Gina felt happy about that. Sure, that likely meant she wouldn't get to play centre on the top line.

But she'd gained a new friend. That counted for something.