

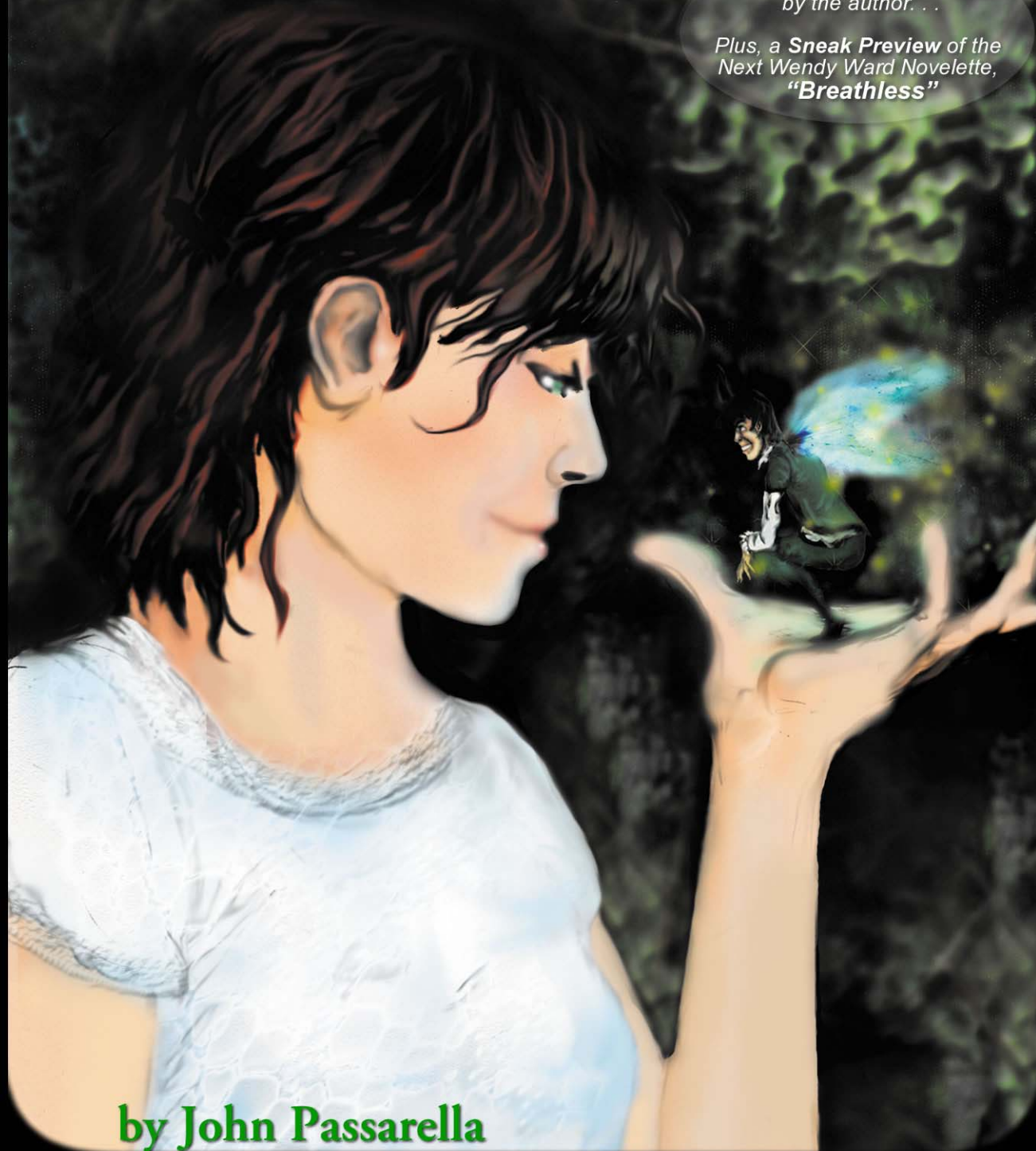
After the events of *WITHER'S LEGACY* . . .

Wendy Ward returns in

"Forces of Nature"

With a new *Introduction*
by the author . . .

Plus, a *Sneak Preview* of the
Next Wendy Ward Novelette,
"Breathless"



by **John Passarella**

Bram Stoker Award-Winning Author of
WITHER'S LEGACY and *KINDRED SPIRIT*

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Novels

Wither

(Bram Stoker Award-Winning First Novel
co-authored under the pseudonym “J.G. Passarella”)

Wither’s Rain: A Wendy Ward Novel

Wither’s Legacy: A Wendy Ward Novel

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“Forces of Nature”

A Wendy Ward Novelette

JOHN PASSARELLA

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Introduction

When I first heard about *Dark Notes from NJ*, the planned Garden State Horror Writers' music-themed anthology, I had already been thinking about continuing Wendy Ward's story—post *Wither's Legacy*—in a series of short stories. As readers of the *Wither*/Wendy novels know, there is no reset button at the end of those tales. The characters do not remain static. They grow and change. And some of them die.

Wither's Legacy was not meant to be the end of Wendy's story, notwithstanding the “trilogy” tag that Pocket Books began to employ with the release of the third book. My intention was to write at least one more Wendy Ward novel. But one question remained: When?

Kindred Sprit was in the publishing pipeline even before the release of *Wither's Legacy*. Plus, I had begun to work on the first novel in a planned supernatural thriller trilogy with series potential. That meant several years would pass before I would have the opportunity to work on the next Wendy Ward novel. That's a long hiatus in an ongoing series!

Perceptive readers have guessed that *Wither's Legacy* was not intended as the definitive end of Wendy's story. *Wither's* “curse” is unbroken and many questions remain unanswered. Though each book told a complete story, the bigger story arc has yet to conclude. These readers continue to ask me: What's next?

Because the Wendy Ward stories are set in present day, I wanted to bring Wendy along with me through the years until I was ready to give her the novel treatment once again. The events in *Wither's Legacy* conclude in the winter of 2002 and, as I write this, almost five years have passed. The short stories (technically novelettes, based on word count) are my way of bridging those years. Each novelette (two so far, including the forthcoming “Breathless”) is approximately 10,000 words. The story you are about to read and “Breathless” advance Wendy's life and timeline. That means—as the world of fandom describes such things—these stories are “canon.” The (eventual) fourth Wendy Ward novel will reflect the events that take place in these stories and in any other Wendy Ward stories I write between now and that next book. This will allow me to keep Wendy current and not have to explain what happened in the intervening years. So, where to begin? As I mentioned above, when I heard about *Dark Notes From NJ*, the idea, if not the actual plot, of “Forces of Nature” was already in the planning stages. The theme of the anthology called for stories based upon the music of New Jersey singers and songwriters. I chose Patti Smith's “Dancing Barefoot.” To my ears, this song has an eerie, earthly, magical mood. Qualities perfectly suited to Wendy Ward and

the type of stories in which she appears. Seeking plot inspiration, I listened to the song repeatedly and reviewed the lyrics line by line.¹ I sensed a “magic ritual” / “communing with nature” quality to the words, combined with a strong sense of the duality of human nature: the feminine and the masculine.

That’s how my process began. I thought: What if Wendy wasn’t the only one chosen as a force for nature? What if a man had been chosen? And, what if that man had made entirely different choices? Would Wendy be tempted to lay down the relentless burden of fighting Wither’s “legacy” for a simple yet heartbreaking price? Could she trust the assurances of someone imbued with magic? Because Wither’s curse might not always confront her in the form of supernatural ferociousness. Instead, what if it tried to kill her with kindness—and the allure of an enchanted seduction . . . ?

* * * * *

After you finish “Forces of Nature,” turn the page to read an excerpt from the forthcoming Wendy Ward novelette “Breathless.”

¹Due to copyright restrictions, we were prohibited from reproducing lyrics within our stories. For that reason, I leave it to you, the intrepid reader, to locate a copy of the lyrics for your own perusal.

Forces of Nature

Somehow, she found herself in the familiar place she was loath to visit.

As if waking from an extended, vivid dream of nighttime driving along Gable Road, of navigating the winding deer trail on foot through dark woods and treacherous undergrowth until she reached the remembered location, she stood within the uneven circle of deciduous and coniferous trees, in the clearing where she had once, naively and sans clothes, performed a magic ritual. No less remarkable because it had been her intention, her incantation had summoned a light autumn rain. Unfortunately, her solitary act under that starry sky had also triggered a rain of destruction she never could have foreseen. Nonetheless, she blamed herself. Had then, and probably always would.

This night, under a waning gibbous moon, she strolled absently around the clearing, wondering what had brought her back. “Music,” she whispered finally as the truth became evident to her. “Strange music...”

While her troubling memories distracted her, the ethereal melody teased playfully at her consciousness. Yet when she strained to hear the song, it faded away, no more than an aural mirage. Was the song a memory as well? Or something more. It seemed the only way to hear it was to stop listening for it. Therefore, she let her mind mull over the repercussions of that fateful autumn night...

Wendy had lived under the misconception that her innocent magic ritual had summoned the *witch* known to the colonial townfolk of Windale as Elizabeth Wither. With an origin extending millennia into the past, the demonic creature had been ripe for a reawakening all on her own. Wendy’s spell had, however, summoned Wither’s evil into her life, the way magnetic north attracts the lodestone of a compass needle. Injury, death and destruction had followed, eventually claiming the lives of Wendy’s parents.

Conscious of the return of the pleasant refrain, Wendy stopped walking. “Humming,” she said to the night. *Midsummer night*, she remembered. Alternately known on the Wiccan calendar as Litha, Midsummer was the day when nature’s magic was most powerful. *More than coincidence at work here.*

Years ago, while ensconced in this oblong glade, she had performed a feat of powerful magic. Now she sensed magic not of her own creation, an eerily charged atmosphere of expectation and infinite possibility. At once alluring and frightening.

With the realization that the magic itself may have lured her here, that whoever had performed the magic had wanted her to return to this place, she became aware of

silence. Under the weight of her attention, the song had faded again. But here, of all places, Wendy had little trouble distracting herself...

On three separate occasions, Wendy had assumed the terror was over. Once, after the death of Wither's monstrous form, again when her Gina Thorne human incarnation had died and, finally, with the flash of eerie green light that had marked the destruction of the winter demon summoned by Wither's curse. Each time marked a foolish assumption on Wendy's part. She knew better now. Wither's curse, if not Wither herself, lived on. The wave of supernatural green light that had blasted out of the abandoned movie theater had not been an ending, merely a continuation. Wither's curse had called another creature of chaos.

Almost nine months later, with the help of her special friends, some heavy machinery and a fifty-five gallon drum of gasoline at a construction site, Wendy defeated what she believed to be an ogre. Compelled by the curse to leave its deep forest home somewhere in Europe, the ogre had apparently crossed the Atlantic Ocean as a stowaway in a container ship. After the ogre's death, Wendy witnessed the same flash of green, radiating from the burning construction site into the night, seeking whatever would eventually come and try to kill her next. In a fit of despair, streaked with the filth of the battle just past, she dropped to her knees and wept. Alex, bloody from his close encounter with the rampaging ogre, tried to console her, but Wendy shook her head, repeating grimly, "It's never going to end."

During her inattention, the lilting song had returned, teasing at her consciousness and tempting her to listen.

On impulse, Wendy kicked off her shoes—bedroom slippers, actually—and walked barefoot on the cool, packed earth. Belatedly, she realized she was wearing her knee-length white cotton nightgown, which meant she had climbed out of bed and into the Pathfinder without pausing at dresser drawers or closet. Never prone to sleepwalking, she recognized some other agent was at work. Whatever it was, the song was part of it.

Raising her arms on either side of her with her elbows bent, palms up and fingers spread, she began a slow, twirling dance, hesitant at first because she needed to disregard the rhythm of the magical song and find instead another beat, the pulse of this place, issuing from the ground, imparted to soles of her feet like a magical guide instructing her in the performance of an enchanted initiation rite.

I'm easily distracted here, she thought, maybe that's why he—no! Stop thinking about—He? But who is...? Stop! Just...accept it. And think about something else.

Survival—

—was her first thought. Sometimes her only thought. She had survived the years since 1999 by trusting her instincts, natural and preternatural.

After dispatching the ogre, she survived the winter without incident, but the spring thaw of 2003 brought werewolves. Wither's curse had infected—yes, *infected*

seemed to be the most accurate word—the leader of the werewolf pack. Out of submission, the rest of the wolves had followed him to her. Wendy discovered that Abby’s own wolf form was immune to the supernatural curse—the contagion—of werewolf bites. The young girl stalked and harried several of the subordinate wolves while Wendy, protected within her magic sphere, called the leader out into the open... where, from higher ground, Chief of Police Robert McKay had a clear shot with a sharpshooter’s rifle specially loaded with silver ammunition. After three shots, two to the torso and one to the head, the alpha wolf dropped and, in death, transformed back into his human form. With their leader dead and under no magical compulsion themselves, the remaining pack members scattered and fled.

Moments later, to no one’s surprise, least of all Wendy’s, the dreaded flash of green light pulsed out into the night, seeking another creature of chaos. Wendy remembered the fateful line from the curse: *“One by one—and by one more—seek her out, forevermore...”*

As she danced in tranquil loops around the glade, Wendy spoke to the one who hummed the elusive night song. “Is that what you are?” she asked curiously and, strangely, without fear. “The next one in line?”

Replacing the hum, yet almost as pleasant, a male voice whispered in response, “Welcome back, Wendy.”

“Back?” Wendy asked. “You know I’ve been here before?”

“Of course.”

How? Magic? Made her wonder if she’d stumbled into a velvet-lined cage. The winter demon, the ogre, and the werewolves had been obvious threats. Perhaps this time the threat was not as obvious but no less dangerous. Above her, the dark and lush intermingled canopies of leaves and pine needles acquired sudden, ominous weight and the cool ground beneath her bare feet conducted an electric charge of fear straight to her spine.

Reflexively, her right hand drifted to her left wrist, but found it bare. The multi-bead bracelet, her primary magical aid and focus, was at home, on her nightstand, where she placed it before turning in each night, and where sleepwalking-Wendy had no doubt left it in her haste to come to the forest clearing. With the touch of a quartz crystal, she could instantly raise her protective sphere. Without the *crutch* of the crystal, she could still conjure a sphere, but she would need a few precious seconds to concentrate, to center herself for the task. The Crone had warned her about her reliance on the beads. Now that debt might come due, with usurious interest. Hesitantly, she asked, “Who are you?”

Soft laughter.

She couldn’t tell from which direction the sound had emanated. Nowhere and everywhere at once. Turning in a slow circle, she strained to see beyond the dark

phalanx of looming tree trunks, to spot the slightest movement, some visual clue that would reveal his location. “What—what’s so funny?”

“Each night, you’re quicker,” he said. “But I must always reintroduce myself before we begin again.”

Various questions bounced around her frantic consciousness. *Each night? Quicker? Begin what?* She verbalized one. “What do you mean by ‘reintroduce’?”

“This is the third night in a row that we have... met for the first time,” he explained. “My name is Morgan.”

Name recognition tickled at her consciousness but nothing more. She tried, unsuccessfully, to conjure a face from the depths of her subconscious. If she had a visual memory to pair with the name, it remained repressed. “I don’t know anyone named Morgan.”

“Until two nights ago, that may have indeed been true.”

Performing a crude imitation of a pirouette, she cast anxious glances in every direction. “Why can’t I see you? Are you a figment of my imagination? A lucid dream? Or... something else?”

“Depends on how you define reality.”

Though he had the ability to project his voice from no particular direction, Wendy peered into the depths of the nighttime forest with the continuing hope that a telltale movement that would reveal his position, thus ending one mystery. “Shouldn’t reality be a constant?”

He laughed again. “Reality is subject to creative perception,” he said. “You excel in that regard.”

“I do?”

“Yes, you do, Gwendolyn Alice Ward,” he said. “Suffice to say that I am real enough... for now. For tonight, at least.”

“Real... but not real all the time.” To herself, Wendy wondered, *Is insanity a sudden condition, or does it creep up on you when you aren’t paying attention?*

“As far as I’m concerned, I’m always real,” he said. “The perception of others, however, is variable.”

During their discourse, Wendy continued to amble around the clearing feigning a casual air while inwardly wary. She cast what she hoped would appear to be mildly inquisitive glances into the various layers of shadows clotting the deep spaces beyond the intermittent wall of trees. Beneath her pretense of calm, a growing fear bubbled and percolated within her, threatening to overwhelm her at any moment. *After everything I’ve faced and survived, she thought, I’ll be damned if a disembodied voice is going to intimidate me!* “Show yourself.”

“You know the secret,” he said. “Reveal me.”

“You have the wrong girl, Morgan.”

“Oh, no,” he said, chuckling. “You are definitely the right girl. If nothing else, your presence here confirms that.”

“Right. Wrong. Whatever. I don’t have the first clue about your little secret.”

“Then you remember nothing about lifting the veil?”

Something clicked in her mind. “Lifting the...”

“Yes,” he said encouragingly. “Lifting the veil! You remembered how to hear without listening. Now remember how to see...”

“...without looking.” The idea was oddly familiar to her. To read Wither’s infernal journal and to see through the wendigo’s glamour, she had learned a visual technique she dubbed *border vision*. But lifting the veil involved a different border altogether—the border between worlds or dimensions, between realities. In some ways, lifting the veil was like gazing through a different facet of a crystal, shifting visual perception.

“Why is that familiar to me?”

“Because I taught you,” he said, “Two nights ago.”

“But I don’t remember.”

“Not surprising,” he said. “That is the way of it.”

“You... made me forget?”

“On the contrary,” he said. “I’m trying to help you remember. This would all proceed apace if only you could remember what came before.”

“Tell me what to do.”

“Stop looking for me,” he said. “And see me.”

Belatedly, Wendy became aware that she’d been staring for some time in one particular direction for no apparent reason, as if convinced that he stood there, just out of sight. She hadn’t moved since—since she recalled the idea of lifting the veil. Maybe she knew where he stood, but she was no closer to seeing him. At least not by continuing to look for him. So she stopped.

Stopped trying to find him, stopped staring expectantly... and simply gazed straight ahead, accepting what she saw rather than looking for something that wasn’t there.

And then something was—

—in front of her, the air began to sparkle with a pure, golden light, as if a halo had shattered into a million luminescent pieces that refused to fall to the ground and instead swirled and expanded slowly to encompass an upright, oblong shape. Within the rippling boundaries of that loop of twinkling golden lights, the air shimmered briefly, taking on weight and substance before finally resolving into the body of a man who appeared to be no more than three or four years older than her twenty-one.

Tall, slender yet muscular, he had a swimmer’s rather than a weightlifter’s physique. Curly, medium brown hair framed a pleasant and clean-shaven face, but her attention was drawn primarily to his unusual eyes, one blue, the other green.

Wendy found herself undeniably and unaccountably attracted to the man. Yes, he was handsome in a conventional sense, but he possessed an alluring quality beyond what she could attribute to his physical characteristics alone. She wanted to gravitate toward him, to surrender to her weak-in-the-knees sensation and stumble into his embrace. Because of her experience with magic, she suspected a glamour was at work and she fought against the urgent impulse. Despite her resolve, her mouth was dry when she spoke. “Morgan, I presume?”

With a courtly nod, he spread his arms and said, “At your service.”

Morgan wore a white shirt with frilly lace collar and cuffs beneath a snug green, crushed velvet tunic with matching, equally snug trousers, and flexible tan slippers. He looked like a cross between a gymnast and a medieval troubadour.

“Now that I see you,” she said, “I’m feeling a bit underdressed.”

In contrast to his elaborate garb, Wendy was barefoot, dressed in a sleeveless and shapeless cotton nightgown draped over half her normal complement of undergarments.

“I’m partly to blame for your... informality. But not to worry,” he said. “You look positively delightful.”

Wendy’s heart raced at his compliment. *Charitable at best*, she thought as she swept a nervous hand through her bed-head tangle of her auburn hair. She attempted to cover her heated physical response with a dash of indignation. “So you lured me here?”

“Called you.”

“There’s a difference?”

“With regard to my intent, yes. If it’s any consolation, you would not have heeded my call if you did not wish to come.”

“Said the siren to the sailor,” Wendy replied wryly. “But our roles are reversed. Sirens are supposed to be female.”

He chuckled. “That’s what you said our first night together.”

Upon hearing the words “first night together” Wendy experienced a vivid and ribald daydream image that she dispelled by seizing upon her irritation. “Sorry I’m so predictable,” she said. “If you hadn’t made me forget the past two nights, I could have brought some original material to the table.”

Ignoring her annoyed tone, he wagged an admonishing finger at her. “I told you. I’m not responsible for your memory lapses. No more than you are responsible for fleeting footprints in the sand as you walk along the beach. Silent echoes are the way of my kind.”

“Your kind?” Wendy asked nervously. Her heart lurched in her chest, but this time as a result of fright rather than excitement. She took a reflexive step backward. “Then... you’re not human.”

“No,” he said. “I’m not.”

* * *

Twelve-year-old Abby MacNeil-Nottingham sat up in bed with such a profound sense of unease that she assumed she'd woken from a nightmare. If that were true, the details of the dream escaped her. Heart pounding in her chest, she tried to control her rapid breathing as she glanced around her dark bedroom. Nothing seemed amiss. Across the room, Erica slept soundly in her bed, undisturbed. Rowdy, wherever he was at the moment, hadn't raised a canine alarm. Abby strained to hear... anything.

Soft voices—down the hall—too late for visitors...

The television, Abby realized belatedly. Ever since her husband's death, Abby's adoptive mother had trouble sleeping. She'd sit in the family room watching classic movies on cable television until she fell asleep. The old familiar voices kept her company when the nights became too lonely, even in a house with four young children and a frenetic chocolate Lab.

To confirm her belief that the house was in order, Abby slipped out of her room and crept down the hallway of the rancher to peer into the family room. From years of practiced stealth, she knew which floorboards would sound a squeak of protest and avoided them. A quick glance across the family room revealed Christina Nottingham asleep on the sofa, in front of the twenty-seven inch television and a telecast of *Brigadoon*.

Abby was saddened by, but had grown accustomed to her new mother's nighttime routine. Nothing out of the ordinary, which finally convinced her that whatever had roused her from a sound sleep probably had something to do with her extraordinary life. The alarm had been internal, the result of the finely-tuned sixth sense she had inherited along with her shape-shifting abilities.

Returning to the bedroom she shared with Erica, Abby removed her pajamas and underwear and slipped on a robe, which had become her own familiar routine. Although Mrs. Nottingham knew about Abby's nighttime excursions in nonhuman forms, she seemed to worry more about Abby than Sheriff Nottingham ever had. And so Abby saw no reason to wake her simply to have her fret over Abby's safety all night. Of course, there was the slight chance—*okay, not so slight*—that she wouldn't permit Abby to venture out tonight. Abby couldn't risk a figurative and literal grounding. This was something she had to do.

Abby lived with her own brand of loneliness, an outgrowth of being different from everyone, of being a secret outsider, not quite human—or something more than human. And there were nights when she had trouble sleeping, nights when she vividly recalled Sheriff Nottingham's last moments and couldn't help but blame herself for her part in the unfortunate chain of events that had led to his death. She thought that she should have been the one to die. He was a father and a husband, an important man and a brave man. Why had he sacrificed himself to save her? That question kept her awake on those lonely nights, brought tears to her eyes and wrenching sobs to her chest that she would stifle by pressing her face into her pillow until they stopped or until she fell

asleep from sheer exhaustion. The reason for his sacrifice was her responsibility now. When she was scared and afraid to act, she remembered her responsibility to him, her second father—her good father. She had to be worthy of his sacrifice, always, or he had died for nothing. She couldn't bear the thought of letting his death be meaningless.

Navigating the dark house by memory, Abby made her way into the kitchen and grabbed her special backpack off its wall peg. She eased open the sliding door, stepped out onto the deck and closed the door behind her. After a quick scan at the backyard, she shrugged off the robe, rolled it up and stuffed it into the backpack's main compartment. If she had been planning to take her wolf form, she would have strapped on the backpack before the change. Instead, she crouched beside it and balanced herself by splaying her fingertips against the wooden deck. After several deep breaths, she began her other transformation. Whenever she shape-shifted from human to wolf, she imagined her body expanding into the lupine form, but the sensation was reversed when she remolded her bones for flight. In order to take the form of a red-tailed hawk, she had to contract from head to toe. As she magically shed the weight of her flesh and the heft of her bones, her body sprouted a warm coating of down and feathers. Arms and fingers thinned and spread into powerful wings while feet and toes retracted and reshaped themselves into fierce talons.

Moments after the transformation was complete, she reached out with one set of talons and clutched a backpack strap. Then, with several beating thrusts of her wings, she was aloft, rising above the deck and soaring over a group of oak and maple trees at the edge of the backyard. In her avian form, her preternatural instincts were clearer. She knew the cause of her nocturnal distress involved Wendy.

“KEE-Arr!” she shrieked into the night and began her search.

* * *

Morgan sighed, no doubt in response to the look of horror in Wendy's eyes. “I was human. Born human. Technically, I may still be human.”

“But now... a creature of chaos? Wither's curse called you.”

“No.”

“But you said—”

“True, I've changed,” he said, then pointed at her. “But, then, so have you.”

“You're wrong.” For now, her fear and suspicion were proof against her unnatural attraction to him, allowing her to stay focused. “I'm still human.”

“I won't debate your humanity,” he said. “But you must admit you are far from ordinary. One might even say gifted.”

“I suppose.”

“Well,” he said, clapping a hand over his chest, “same here. I am not one of Wither's posthumous minions. You and I are... of a kind. That's why I'm here. And why you came when I called.”

“I came because your song is enchanted,” Wendy said, knowing the truth of it. “You lured me here with magic. That’s the only reason.”

“You responded to my song because it resonated with you,” he insisted. “The song spoke to you before I could speak to you. The song bridged the gap between our worlds, opened your ears to my voice.”

“Lifting the veil.”

“Yes!”

“Doesn’t mean it’s not magical.”

“Of course, it’s magical,” he said, laughing agreeably. “That’s how we communicate.”

“For future reference,” Wendy said, raising her hand to tick off points on her fingers, “I have an e-mail account, a mailing address, a land line and a cell phone.”

“I have no use for technology.”

“Nor I for hypnotic compulsion.”

“Suggestion, not compulsion.”

“Semantics.”

He shook his head and sighed. “The song was more than a means to contact and summon you,” he said. “It was a test of your... receptivity. I needed to know if you would heed my call. And you have, three nights in a row.”

“So you say,” Wendy said petulantly even though she believed he was telling the truth. Her memories remained hidden in the manner of elusive dreams that scatter upon waking yet leave behind a powerful emotional residue.

“In your heart,” he said, taking a measured step toward her, “you know this is true.” With his thumb, index and middle fingers, he caressed the side of her face from her cheek to the tip of her chin.

She closed her eyes and trembled under his touch. *What happened to me last night? And the night before? Why does he have this power over me?* She had to shrug off a contented languor to reply to him. “What’s the point? You called. I came. Now what?”

“As simple as that?”

Wendy spread her arms. “Why not?”

He grinned and took her shoulders in his hands. “You’re direct. Good. Very good. Time is short. And you must decide tonight, before midnight.”

“What?” Wendy said, pleasantly aware of the warmth of his hands through her cotton nightgown. She wanted to hold him, but fought to keep her hands at her side. “Exactly what am I suppose to decide by midnight?”

“This is midsummer night,” he said. “Time for you to decide if you will come with me, to live beyond the veil, in my world.”

“No offense, Morgan, but why would I go with you... anywhere?” If she had allowed the part of her most susceptible to his magical allure to cast the deciding vote,

her response would have been a breathless whisper, *Take me with you, Morgan*. But her logical side continued to forestall his supernatural persuasion. *God and Goddess! I'm emotionally intoxicated with him*, she thought desperately, *at a time when I need to navigate the straight line of rational judgment*.

He cupped her face in the palms of his hands and met her gaze with his strange yet wonderful blue and green eyes. "We are alike in many ways," he said, "We are connected to nature in a special way, beyond word or deed. We sense and experience a natural grace forever outside the ken of mortal men and women. For whatever reason, nature chose us. Yet neither of us is complete without the other, Wendy. Male and female, we complement each other. Together, we are..."

"...whole," Wendy said, nodding as if she suddenly remembered a long-forgotten lesson. His gaze, his words and his touch mesmerized her. She believed him. She wanted to go with him. And she wanted him. But—

"Yes!" he said, beaming. "Precisely."

She sighed as he pulled her into his warm and loving embrace, laughed with joy as he spun her around and around and—

Up!

The ground had slipped away beneath them. Wendy's toes dangled, no longer brushing the cool carpet of the forest floor. Locked in each other's arms, Wendy and Morgan were rising...floating upward, as effortlessly as helium-filled balloons released to the summer sky. Wendy's breath caught in her throat. "We—we're levitating!"

"One of the many things I can teach you," Morgan whispered into her ear. "We'll have all the time in my world on the other side, free of the distractions of this world."

"You can teach me?"

"The magic you've learned," Morgan explained, "is only the beginning." He extended his right hand and traced lazy loops in the air with his hand. The pure golden light she'd witnessed before seemed to spill from his fingertips, glittering shards of glowing warmth that expanded like smoke rings. Within the loops of golden light, the air began to shimmer. And together, locked in their levitating embrace, they drifted toward the thickening air. "Let us cross over now and begin our journey of discovery."

"Wait!" Wendy exclaimed, clutching his shoulder. "This isn't right."

"Do you wish to come with me?"

Wendy's resolve crumbled. "More than anything..."

"Then, with a thought, the deed is done!"

Wendy gasped as they swooped across the upper reaches of the forest clearing on a path to the rippling expanse of air, ready to slip through the veil between worlds. Suffused with a level of exhilaration unlike any she'd ever known, Wendy chose that moment to scream.

* * *

For a while, Abby's flight took her toward Wendy's cottage, as she intended. But for a few moments, her mind drifted from her intention and, on some sort of avian autopilot, she changed directions. When she became aware that she was flying in the wrong direction, she banked to the left to correct her course, but the closer she came to Wendy's house, the more her sense of unease grew. The instinct that attuned her to Wendy, the same instinct that had roused her from a deep sleep, was now telling her that her chosen course was mistaken. She needed to let her otherworldly intuition guide her to the cause of her internal alarms. Veering right, she gave her latent navigational instinct free rein over her flight. Before long, for some unknown but important reason, she was paralleling Gable Road and soon spotted a familiar vehicle parked on the shoulder. Burgeoning treetops rippled beneath her as her hawk eyes darted left and right until she saw—

—Wendy *floating* in a forest clearing!

Startled, Abby banked sharply, circling above the glade. In a moment, an obvious explanation occurred to Abby. Astral projection. Several times before, Abby had witnessed Wendy's astral image. Made perfect sense. And yet, as Abby descended, she noticed details that seemed increasingly odd... Wendy's posture... spinning in a circle... arm raised but bent at the elbow as if holding someone or something... the front of her nightgown pressed against her body... the oddly excited expression on her face... and she seemed to be speaking to someone who wasn't there. Abby searched for other visual cues and noticed a rippling in the air near Wendy, surrounded by bits of twinkling golden light—magic!

Something was wrong.

Abby swooped down and bellowed her hawk cry: “KEE-Arr!”

Unfortunately, Wendy seemed deaf to the piercing sound. A moment later, she shot across the clearing and appeared to scream. This time, Abby was deaf to Wendy's human voice. Wendy was struggling in some—*thing's* grasp, desperate to break free.

Without a moment's hesitation, Abby brought her wings back and dove, targeting her beak and talons on whatever invisible entity had Wendy in its clutches. Forgotten, the backpack slipped from her grasp and dropped into the darkness below and behind her, thwacking a branch or two before plopping to the ground.

As she drew close to the glade, Abby noticed a golden translucent energy in front of Wendy's thrashing body, akin to heat waves, but in the magical realm of preternatural physics, something Abby suspected would be invisible to her human eyes. Abby's speculation ended abruptly as she crashed into an invisible wall, an unexpected collision that precipitated a stunned, fluttering descent into darkness.

* * *

“Stop!” Wendy yelled frantically as they neared the rippling mass of air bordered by the sparkling shards of golden light. *Some kind of portal between worlds*, she thought. And somehow she knew Morgan had sold her a one-way ticket.

He might have listened to her, but she couldn't take that chance. He hadn't earned her trust and this was not a gamble she was willing to make. Though he had levitated them a dozen feet off the forest floor, she shoved herself violently out of his embrace. Because she *was* willing to risk the—

—*fall!*

Her right arm struck the ground awkwardly and buckled behind her at an unnatural angle. A flash of white-hot pain. Then everything went momentarily black. Next she was moaning in pain, writhing on the ground in extreme discomfort.

"It's okay—Wendy—okay!"

Morgan said more than those few comforting words but she was having heaps of trouble concentrating on anything but the fire in her nerve endings. His palms pressed gently against her arm and a flash of warm amber light washed over her... and she was at peace, breathing deeply with only a memory of sudden, sharp and unremitting pain.

Trembling, she pushed herself up into a sitting position and rubbed her healed arm. "Zero style points for that landing," she said with a self-conscious grimace.

"You're graceful in other ways."

"You healed me," she said softly. "Thanks."

"Better now?"

She nodded. "Much."

"You would have done the same for me." Kneeling beside her, he placed his hands on her shoulders and shook his head. "But I'm confused."

She chuckled wryly. "Imagine how I feel."

"I thought you wanted to come with me."

"Me too," Wendy said. "That's the problem."

"What am I missing?"

"Everything I'm missing," Wendy said. "I can't just—leave with you!"

"Why not?"

Wendy climbed to her feet, absently brushing twigs and dirt from her knees, arms and nightgown. "First of all, what about my..." She'd been about to say family, but she'd lost her parents to Wither's murderous wrath, and she had no siblings. "What about my friends? My obligations? What about my life here?"

"Irrelevant," he said with a pleasant smile. "Once you cross over, you will understand how... unimportant all those things are."

"It's not that simple."

"We have less than an hour until midnight," Morgan said. "It needs to be simple, Wendy."

"Haven't you heard?" Wendy said wryly. "I'm a complicated girl."

"Oh, I believe that," he said. "But I need to convince you soon, or everything I've—correction, everything we've worked for, will be lost."

“Okay, I’ll admit the idea of having a true mentor—someone advanced enough to teach me how to better use and development my magic—is very appealing,” she said. “For so long, I’ve stumbled and bumbled my way through all of this, I often wonder if I’ll ever get it right. Hannah—the Crone—visits me from time to time and points me in the right direction—usually—but she’d be the first one to admit she’s not the ideal magic teacher.”

“You see,” he said, taking her hands. “Everything makes sense.”

“But you—there’s something... enchanted about you,” Wendy said. “Maybe it’s intentional—”

“It’s not.”

“Okay, so you *exude* supernatural charm,” Wendy said. “Preternatural pheromones. I’m trying to fight that but it’s potent stuff, believe me.”

“Don’t fight it!”

“Yeah, right, buster,” she said with what she knew was fragile bravado. “I’m not quite ready to swoon for you.” *Oh, but I could, so easily,* she thought. *Resisting him is like swimming against a strong current.*

He beamed proudly. “You are stronger than I ever imagined.”

“I wish,” Wendy scoffed. “Fighting your mojo is wearing me out.”

As if on cue, he leaned in and kissed her. For a moment she tried to pull away, and then she forgot why she would have ever considered that course of action. Tension drained out of her neck and shoulders as the kiss became epic, potential prelude to other things, warm and delicious possibilities she thrilled to contemplate, but—

Against his hungry lips, she murmured, “Alex.”

“Hmm?”

With great reluctance, Wendy extricated herself from Morgan’s warm embrace. “What about Alex?” she asked. “I haven’t even thought about him.”

“Where is Alex now?”

Wendy frowned. “In Minnesota,” she said softly, defensively.

“Far away from you,” Morgan said.

“It’s not like that,” Wendy said. Alex had received his management degree, with honors, from Danfield University a few weeks ago, but hadn’t decided on a job. Family issues had complicated his job search. “His father had a heart attack in May. He’s been helping out at home. Besides, his mother made him promise to take some interviews out there before deciding...”

“Before deciding if he would stay here with you?”

Wendy nodded. “But it’s not what you’re thinking.” *And why do I care what Morgan thinks? Why do I feel this compulsion to defend my relationship with Alex to this... whatever he is?* “I’m flexible. I don’t need to stay here in Windale.”

“What about your magic shop?”

“How do you know about The Crystal Path?”

He waved the question away as if it was inconsequential feat of information gathering. In light of what she'd witnessed of his abilities, she supposed it was. "You have many ties here. More than you know."

"Kayla manages the shop," Wendy said. "She can handle things if I leave."

"You would give it to her? Just like that?"

Wendy shrugged. "Sure. Why not?"

"So you admit are ready to leave at a moment's notice?"

"Yes—no! That's not what I meant."

"Wendy, I understand that you care for this Alex person," Morgan said. "But you were meant for me. We were meant for each other."

Staring into his disparately colored eyes, she wanted to believe him, so much that she ached with her need to be in his arms again. And that scared her. Because of his strange, potent allure, she couldn't trust her own judgment. What if through his magic, his wants and desires became hers? *Emotionally intoxicated*, she thought, *or emotionally possessed? What is this hold he has over me?*

Wendy looked away from his yearning eyes. Only then could she reply to his powerful words. "I can't know if that's true."

"You will," he said earnestly, stroking her auburn hair as if to soothe her. "Listen to your heart."

Wendy chuckled bitterly. "My heart is tongue-tied."

"Alex knows you are different, Wendy," Morgan said. "He will understand. And he wants what is best for you. You will never reach your full potential here."

"I don't care about my potential," Wendy said angrily, feeling heat rise to her cheeks. "I'm happy with my life."

"Are you? Really?"

"Yes... mostly."

Wendy turned her back to him, hoping he wouldn't notice when she wiped away tears that had gathered in her eyes.

He spoke softly, knowingly. "Because she haunts you."

No need to ask who *she* was. Wither was the answer to most of the questions in Wendy's life. "Yes," she said. "I've tried everything I could think of, but I haven't been able to put an end to her curse."

He placed his hands on her shoulders again and gently turned her around to face him. When she looked up at his face, he was smiling with beatific warmth. She shook her head in confusion. "Come with me," Morgan said, "and the curse ends tonight."

Wendy glared at him. "What are you saying?"

"The gift I bring to you," he said patiently, "is freedom from Wither's curse. It will not follow you to the other side. Free yourself of this burden. Join me and my kind on the other side."

“This is crazy,” Wendy said. “The other side of what? I don’t even know who or what you’re kind are!”

Morgan raised an arm toward the starry night and, with a finger-curling gesture, brought the portal to his world—the oblong-shaped expanse of shimmering air trapped within the loop of glittering golden light—down to the ground, an ethereal doorway to the unknown. He reached out and took her hand, gave it a slight squeeze. “No need to float away,” he said. “If you want to discover the wonders my world has to offer, we merely have to walk together a few last steps. If you wish it, we must hurry, because the midnight hour is near.”

The touch of his flesh brought a heady excitement to Wendy she could neither explain nor refute. The best course was not to fight, but to admit her feelings. “I want to go with you, Morgan,” she said truthfully. “I do.”

* * *

Abby recovered her senses, righted herself and turned to face the forest clearing, just out of reach. Taking a few steps, she pecked her hawk head forward and struck an invisible barrier. For a moment she wondered if it was Wendy’s own protective sphere, but judging by her original point of impact, this barrier encompassed the entire glade, much larger than any sphere Wendy had ever conjured.

As Abby watched in concern, Wendy seemed to be conversing with the golden energy—*entity?*—that Abby had noticed just before her collision. A magical being with unknown abilities. Abby made the assumption that this was another in the line of creatures that Wither’s curse had sent to Wendy’s doorstep. And yet, Wendy seemed agitated more than frightened, and she was...

Her beaked head reared back in an avian display of astonishment.

She’s... kissing it—him—whatever it is.

Whatever it was, Wendy had no problem seeing it and—interacting with it. Abby thought she might have better luck with her wolf eyes, so she began an exhausting yet exhilarating double transformation from hawk to girl to wolf. On several occasions, she had tried shape-shifting directly from one animal form to the other, but she’d been unable to accomplish that particular feat. Maybe in time she’d master that shape-shifting shortcut. Or maybe she would always need to start from square one—her humanity—before entering the animal kingdom.

Once she attained wolf form, Abby padded and sniffed around the perimeter of the invisible barrier, a ghostlike ripple of white fur, intent on finding a weak spot or an actual breach, some way to join and assist Wendy. She howled in frustration and was dismayed, but unsurprised, that the sound never reached Wendy’s ears. If the young Wiccan hadn’t heard the screech of a red-tailed hawk, why should Abby expect her to hear the mournful howl of a wolf?

Other than her shape-shifting, which came naturally to her, Abby knew little of magic. But she’d been part of Wendy’s inner circle long enough to suspect the golden

entity was employing a glamour, possibly several, to hide its true appearance from Wendy and to separate her from outside interference. Darting just beyond the tree line, Abby's moon-washed white pelt should have been evident to anyone standing inside the forest clearing. Instead, her frantic pacing around the perimeter of the clearing went unnoticed. Abby thought of the famous picture of the three monkeys, the first covering his eyes, the second his ears, the third his mouth. *See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.*

Frustrated, Abby growled, her dark lips pulling back to expose sharp teeth. Whatever had Wendy's attention was, no doubt, speaking a lot of evil. She rushed the barrier and leapt, perhaps hoping to sink her fangs into the surface and tear it open, but to no avail. Her snout and paws slammed into the hard, unyielding surface and, with a little yelp of pain, she fell awkwardly to the ground.

Beside her, a calm voice spoke. *"Wendy alone must decide this."*

Instantly, Abby shifted position to face the owner of the voice, but relaxed when she saw it was the Crone, Wendy's Wiccan mentor and Hannah's future self, with her gentle face, gray hair, piercing blue eyes and long, flowing robe. No wonder the Crone had surprised her. As a type of astral projection she had no scent.

Abby cocked her head inquisitively.

"He wants her to leave this world," the Crone said. *"And she must decide by midnight."*

Abby looked into the protected glade and saw Wendy's arm reach out, her hand clasping a portion of that golden entity as if ready to embark on a lover's stroll. More alarming was the contented smile on Wendy's face. Abby's paws pushed against the base of the barrier and she began to dig furiously, again to no avail. The barrier continued beneath the soil, no doubt circling all the way to the other side of the glade, forming a perfect sphere.

The Crone shook her head grimly. *"I'm afraid there is nothing you or I can do to stop her. One way or another, it will be decided in there."*

* * *

"I want to go with you, Morgan," Wendy said, reluctantly pulling her hand away from his to clear her head. "At least I think that's how I feel. But I can't make a decision of this magnitude based on feelings alone."

"Why not?" he asked, taking a concerned step toward her.

Wendy retreated the same distance, held her hands out defensively. "No! No touching. Just talking. I can't afford to let you take me for another spin up there," she said, twirling her index finger in a skyward gesture. "Explain yourself."

"Time is short."

"Then talk fast."

Morgan took a deep breath and heaved a long sigh. “As there is no other way to convince you, you leave me no recourse. But know that I have covered some of this same ground last night and the night before.”

“Repetition is the price you pay for those silent echoes.”

“Fine, but keep in mind that our previous encounters may explain why some of this information will resonate with you.”

“Like the hearing without listening stuff? Fair enough. Continue.”

“My people, if you grant that I am now one of them—not entirely true, mind you, but due to my long years of association—”

“Long years? Exactly how old are you?”

“I’ve lived among them for a hundred and fifty years.”

Wendy was stunned. “How—?”

“All will be made evident in time,” he said quickly. “The little time we have left here, that is. As I was saying, my people have been known throughout the ages by many names.”

“Such as...?”

“Tuatha Dé Danann, for one,” he said. “Tylwyth Teg, Daoine Side, the Mother’s Blessing, the Gentry, the Seelie and—”

“Fairies?” Wendy said incredulously. “You come from Faerie?”

Morgan nodded. “Crossing to and from Faerie has always been fraught with peril, but in the last hundred years, as human kind has embraced science and technology, the world of Faerie has withdrawn, a hidden realm if you will, free from the daily concerns of humans. Fairies have thrived with close ties to nature and the natural world, while humans have embraced nonliving, soulless machines. And yet, people such as you and I are different,” he said. “Vastly different. In our hearts, our true nature, we are fairy folk. That is why they have... adopted me as they will welcome you. Wendy, the simple truth is, you belong in Faerie.”

“You’ve become one of them? A fairy?”

“For all intents and purposes,” Morgan said, nodding. “They have taught me their ways, much of their magic, and I have learned their countenances.”

“Countenances?”

Morgan steepled his hands in front of his face for a moment, then spread his arms wide. Sparkling golden fragments of light sprinkled down around him.

Pixie dust, Wendy assumed, smiling at her educated guess.

When the glittering bits of light faded away, Morgan’s body radiated a dazzling golden aura, as if soft light shone from within every pore of his flesh and thread of his clothing. Without waiting for a comment, he waved his glowing arms in front of his body again, producing another shower of pixie dust, and the aura winked out. But now the texture of his skin had changed to an iridescent sheen, reflecting light in rippling rainbow patterns with the slightest movement. Next, he crossed his arms behind his

head and tapped his shoulders. As he drew his hands away, prelude to yet another shower of golden light, translucent wings sprouted from his back and continued to grow until they were half his height.

Wendy shook her head in amazement. "Can you fly with those?"

"Not directly," he said. "Not at this size."

"Size?"

Flashing a mischievous grin, Morgan nodded, clapped his hands softly to produce another shower of golden light, and began to recede. That was her first impression. A moment later, she realized he was shrinking. When he was less than twelve inches high, he began to beat his translucent wings, a rapid fluttering, then a blur of motion, with rainbow patterns dancing across their filmy surface. In the span of three seconds, he had reduced his height to three inches.

Wendy turned in a delighted circle to follow his darting moth-like flight. He hovered in front of her face, still recognizable as Morgan, despite the wings, noticeably pointy ears and the delicate antennas he sported on either side of his forehead. She held her hand out and watched in utter fascination as he alit on her palm, his weight so light he barely dimpled her skin. "How long," she wondered aloud, "to learn that?"

"Seventy years," he said in a small but discernable voice. "But, in my own defense, this is a very advanced countenance."

Wendy had a hard time reconciling his stated age with his youthful appearance. "Are fairies immortal?" she asked. "Are you?"

"I doubt any being is truly immortal," he said. With a blur of his translucent wings, Morgan rose from her palm and began to back away, graceful as a hummingbird. He crossed his arms over his chest, forming an X. "But those in Faerie often say that the wear of our year is but that of a human day." While speaking the last two words, he spread his arms and created another shower of golden pixie dust. Within the glittering light particles, he expanded to his full size. Even as he grew, his wings and antennas retracted and vanished without a trace, and his elfin ears regained their rounded human dimensions. "Have I convinced you?"

"If ever a fairy was," Wendy said, nodding. "You are one."

"Good, because scant minutes remain for us to cross over safely." Morgan indicated the shimmering portal, looped in its own golden light. It was noticeably smaller. "Wendy, the time has come for you to leave this world behind."

He extended his hand.

Wendy wanted to take it, but couldn't. Not yet. "Wither's curse," Wendy said quickly. "You said it would end if I cross over."

Morgan nodded.

"How can I be sure?"

"What evil she sends after you is of this world, not of the next," Morgan explained. "Where you go, that evil cannot follow."

“But you crossed over.”

“By invitation only,” Morgan said. “And tonight, midsummer night, is special. On this night, overlap exists between our worlds. One who knows the magic can traverse the realms. Nearly a hundred years passed before I learned the way of crossing back. By then, all that I knew and all those I had known were gone. You must consider this a one way journey, Wendy. This is your freedom, but there is no turning back. That is the price.”

“You said the evil cannot cross,” Wendy said. “But what if that doesn’t end the curse. What if something comes for me and kills those I leave behind.”

“What is here,” he said with a shrug, “is here, and no concern of yours. When you cross over with me, you will leave behind the worries and problems of the human world. You will relinquish all your human relations. And you will abandon all your possessions. But you will want for nothing in the Faerie realm. Whatever you desire will be yours. In time, in Faerie time, you will see how fleeting and meaningless human concerns really are.”

“It’s hard to imagine.”

“I offer you a world of wonder, free of pain and disease, a world filled with light and joy and limitless potential for one such as you. Your destiny awaits, Wendy,” he proclaimed with his aching beatific smile. “But we must leave now, before the portal is gone.”

Wendy glanced down at her bare feet, smudged now with the dirt of this forest clearing where her magic had first awakened. When she looked again into his expectant blue and green eyes, she had tears in her own. “It sounds incredible,” she said. “But I can’t go with you.”

“Wendy, why?”

“Because,” she said softly, sniffing. “I still care.”

“Please, Wendy,” he said, taking an urgent step toward her. “Reconsider.”

Wendy backed away from him. “No touching. You’d only change my mind. And I can’t allow that.”

He stood there, unmoving, his back to the portal, and sighed. “I understand,” he said, then quirked a grin. “Don’t suppose a goodbye kiss—”

Wendy chuckled. “Like that’s gonna happen!”

“Ah, well,” he said. “Can’t fault me for trying. But one day, I’m afraid you will realize the enormity of this mistake, of staying in your pedestrian world. And you will mourn your decision.”

“Chance I have to take,” Wendy said. “After all, I’m only human.”

“I will never again understand human folly,” Morgan said. He looked around the forest clearing and nodded. “The magic is fading. Farewell, Gwendolyn Alice Ward.”

A familiar bounding white blur shot past Wendy, leaving a tumbling backpack in its wake. *A wolf*, Wendy realized. *Abby!*

Abby's wolf form leapt high and her forepaws struck Morgan squarely in the chest. With a startled cry, he tumbled backwards through the shimmering portal and vanished. Abby dropped to the ground and stood guard until the gateway between human and fairy worlds disappeared. Then she dropped to the ground and began the incredible transformation back to her human self.

While Abby shape-shifted, Wendy scooped up the discarded backpack, avoiding patches of wolf slobber as she opened the flap of the main compartment and fished out Abby's bathrobe. Naked and human, Abby climbed to her feet and glanced around the clearing to get her bearings. She accepted the bathrobe from Wendy and then, as she slipped her arms into the sleeves, she gave a slight nod toward the far side of the clearing.

Wendy turned to see the Crone glide into view. "So the gang's all here."

"We sensed you were in trouble," Abby said. The Crone nodded.

"I'm thankful for your concern, Abby," Wendy said. "But Morgan was about to leave on his own. You didn't have to, uh, show him the door."

"Him?" Abby asked. "To my hawk and wolf eyes, he appeared as some kind of weird magical energy. What was he?"

"A human-turned-fairy," Wendy said, "but he originally had abilities similar to mine. He's lived in the Faerie world for a hundred and fifty years."

"Well, I didn't trust him," Abby said defensively. "Had a feeling he might grab you and pull you through at the last moment."

"He said the decision was mine," Wendy said, then shrugged. "Better safe than sorry, I guess."

The Crone smiled. "*So, you decided to stay with us.*"

"Wasn't easy."

"No?"

"He offered me everything I ever wanted," Wendy said. "If I gave up everything I already had."

"*A fair trade,*" the Crone said, considering. "*Perhaps more than fair.*"

Wendy brushed small twigs and bits of plant matter from Abby's ash-blond hair. The young girl smiled at her and Wendy wondered how different life might have been with a younger sister, if Wendy hadn't been an only child. *Guessing games*, she thought before directing her gaze at the Crone. "He offered me something else," Wendy admitted. "Freedom from Wither's curse."

The Crone frowned in puzzlement, an expression she rarely wore. "*That must have been incredibly hard to resist.*"

Wendy nodded. "For years, I've tried everything in my power to end her curse, to finally be free of Wither's evil legacy. And the solution was right here. Or so it seemed."

Now it was Abby's turn to frown. "I'm confused."

Wendy chuckled softly. “So was I, Abby. Ultimately, that’s why I decided to stay.”

“Was he lying?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Wendy said. “All those years in Faerie really have changed him. He couldn’t understand why I would choose this world instead of his. Yes, he promised an end to Wither’s curse, but only for me, on the other side. But what if the curse has already awakened the next creature of chaos? I imagined all the people it might maim or kill while it searched in vain for me. Morgan couldn’t care enough about that possibility to lie to me about it. Apparently, our misery and suffering mean nothing to those in Faerie.” Wendy sighed. “That contrast made me realize I haven’t given up hope. A small part of me believes I’ll find a real solution, someday.”

“And so you were unwilling to abandon your humanity.”

“He offered me freedom, but it felt like surrender.”

The Crone arched a speculative eyebrow. *“Is it possible Morgan was evil? That he really was the latest creature of chaos summoned by the curse?”*

“I thought so at first,” Wendy said. “A new approach. When brute force fails, try killing me with kindness?”

“You don’t believe that anymore?” Abby asked.

“No, but it may have amounted to the same thing,” Wendy said. “If I leave this world, is that a victory for Wither. Maybe there’s a reason she wants me dead, beyond simple revenge. How can I defeat her if I give up? If I abandon everything.” Wendy shook her head. “In the end, I don’t think it matters which side Morgan was on.”

The Crone smiled wryly. *“He made you an offer you had to refuse.”*

“Making the best of a bad situation is the right choice.” Wendy wrapped her arm around Abby’s shoulders. “C’mon, Abby. Better get you home before Mrs. Nottingham finds you missing and sends a SWAT team to my cottage. I parked the Pathfinder somewhere on Gable Road. I hope.”

“I know where it is,” Abby said, chuckling with her backpack slung over one shoulder. “Saw it on my hawk patrol.”

With utmost care, Wendy and Abby navigated the winding deer trail back to the road, while the Crone simply floated between the dark hulking trees, her astral form at no risk from treacherous footing.

When Gable Road was within sight, Wendy caught the Crone’s eye. “Was it the right choice?”

“The past I remember is based upon the choice you made,” the Crone said. *“What might have been—had you chosen differently—is a mystery.”*

“So your temporally advantaged guess is as good as mine.”

“Perhaps,” the Crone said. *“But I would always prefer memories of the world with you in it.”*

When they reached the comparative safety of the forest green SUV, the Crone bid them farewell and faded back into the future. With the car doors unlocked and her keys dangling from the ignition, Wendy considered herself fortunate no one had stolen the Pathfinder. Would have made for a long walk home in her nightgown and bedroom slippers.

After Wendy started the engine and pulled onto Gable Road, Abby asked her, “Any regrets?”

“It’s human nature to wonder what awaited you on the road not taken,” Wendy said seriously. “Besides, he was totally hot.”

“Wendy!” Abby shrieked with girlish glee.

“And a fantastic kisser.”

“I’m telling Alex!”

“Better not, were-girl!”

They both laughed for a moment. Then, in the companionable silence that followed, Wendy glanced at the girl who was becoming a fine young woman and said, “I’d make the same choice again, Abby.”

“Really?”

“How could I ever regret choosing hope? Choosing life?”

About the Author

John Passarella is the Bram Stoker Award-Winning co-author of *Wither*, chosen by the Horror Writers Association as the best first novel of 1999. Columbia Pictures purchased the film rights to *Wither* in a pre-emptive bid, but the studio has yet to make a feature film version of the story. Passarella followed *Wither* with two standalone sequels (*Wither's Rain & Wither's Legacy*) featuring Wendy Ward as a series character. His other novels are the paranormal thriller *Kindred Spirit* and the original media tie-in novels, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Ghoul Trouble*, *Angel: Avatar* and *Angel: Monolith*.

In his spare time, Passarella designs and maintains Web sites for *New York Times* bestselling authors Harlan Coben and Nicholas Sparks, and has many other clients. For more information, visit www.authorpromo.com.

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About the Illustrator

Eric Asaris has had illustrations published in *Wicked Hollow*, *Not One of Us*, *Quietus*, and *Lullaby Hearse*. You can see his online gallery at <http://degenerart.deviantart.com>.

Now turn the page for a sneak peek at. . .

“Breathless”

Breathless

[The new Wendy Ward Novelette. Available March 2007]

The relentless January snowstorm throttled Windale, Massachusetts, as if determined to wipe the quiet New England college town from existence. Like the encampment of an invading army, ominous storm clouds had rolled across the slate-gray sky at dawn and became entrenched over the downtown area. And if one could consider the storm clouds an army, then *she* was its general. Despite her vast wintry resources, she had come not for a full-scale war, but for a private battle. Strange magic compelled her to slay a single foe—a young woman named Wendy Ward—but she would not hesitate to kill anyone who stood in her way.

“Looks like a pillow factory exploded out there,” Senior Patrolman Curt Melhorn said to the attractive brunette receptionist sitting behind the information desk in the main lobby of Windale General Hospital. Leaning his elbow against the round laminate countertop, he struck a casual pose at odds with his starched uniform. Mostly, he gazed through the large revolving door—motionless now—at the hypnotic snowfall, but occasionally he spared an appreciative glance at the equally hypnotic Kim Doerge.

“Reminds me of the blizzard of 2002,” the receptionist said, shuddering at the memory.

“Before my time,” said Melhorn, who moved to Windale and joined its police force in November 2004, almost fourteen months ago.

“Be glad you missed it.”

Melhorn heard her mutter something about “slasher murders.” He was somewhat familiar with the town’s strange history, the eerie stories of bizarre murders and even more bizarre bogeymen, but he chalked it up to modern folktales, Windale’s peculiar urban legends. Because the town’s economy depended on celebrating a history steeped in witchcraft and persecution, he assumed the chamber of commerce had embellished recent events as a bit of cultural window dressing. New ghosts to spruce up the old haunted house attraction.

Aside from Chester, the old security guard hunched in a cramped booth across the lobby, sleepily contemplating his beckoning retirement years, Melhorn and the receptionist were alone in the expansive lobby. The hospital was unusually quiet. *Everyone safe at home, out of the storm*, he thought. *Fine by me*. Melhorn hated winter.

Thinking ahead to quitting time, he decided to employ the power of the creepy urban legend to his advantage. “I’d be more than happy to give you a ride home after your shift, Ms. Doerge.”

“Might take you up on that, Curt,” she said with a charming little smile. “But, please, call me Kim.”

“Sure thing, K—”

His radio squawked out the voice of Chief McKay. “Curt, what’s your status?”

Turning his head to the side, Melhorn squeezed the transmit button on the mike clipped to his epaulet. “All quiet down here, Chief. Not sure what you’re expecting. Even the snow plows are having a bitch of a time keeping the parking lot clear.”

“Keep your eyes open for anything . . . unusual.”

“Sure, Chief,” Melhorn said, rolling his eyes for Kim’s benefit.

She chuckled softly and brushed a stray lock of her shoulder-length brown hair from her green eyes.

Melhorn released the transmit button and nodded toward the front entrance.

“Nothing’s moving out there. Am I right or am I—*Hello!*”

Kim followed his gaze. “Is that . . . ?”

“I’ll be damned.”

From within the swirling funnels of snow, a young woman with long black hair falling straight to her waist walked with a determined but unhurried stride. Her face was pale, uncovered, and she wore only a long, flowing white gown, almost perfect camouflage against the whiteout conditions.

“She’s not wearing a coat,” Kim said, shaking her head in disbelief. “No scarf, hat or gloves, for that matter.”

“There’s something else . . .” He almost said “strange” but his voice faded away. Maybe this qualified as “unusual” but she was a lone woman, apparently unarmed, nothing for him to be concerned about. Certainly nothing to report. *Don’t want McKay thinking I’m a nervous Nellie*.

Nevertheless, something wasn’t right—

“Maybe she’s in shock,” Kim suggested.

“Could be hypothermia,” he said, casually displaying his limited medical knowledge to the nubile receptionist.

The pale woman slapped her palm against the button that set the revolving door in motion. The *whump-whump* of the moving door panels startled Chester out of his lethargic state. He looked up in mild confusion, scrambled off his stool, hitched his belt up over his expansive waistline and positioned himself near the door to greet the visitor.

Melhorn stayed by the counter, letting the geezer handle the attractive, underdressed woman, hoping his restraint would win him points with Kim.

A moment later, the woman stepped out of the spinning doorway. She had a face as smooth and pale as porcelain, ice-blue eyes, a delicate nose, and blood-red, Cupid's bow lips.

"Can I help you, Miss?"

The frosty glare she directed at the old-timer rode the blast of frigid air she'd admitted into the hospital. "I am not here for you," she said dismissively.

"Didn't expect you were," Chester said with an affable chuckle. "You're visiting then?"

Her blood-red smile never reached those winter-crystal eyes. "In a manner of speaking."

"Well, then," Chester said, hitching up his pants again, "tell Kim, over there, the name of the patient, and she'll direct you—"

"You bore me."

The woman grabbed Chester's collar, as if she meant to shove him aside. Given their respective sizes, that was not about to happen, unless she held a black belt in some martial—

Chester groaned in pain, doubling over.

Then the weirdest thing happened. The woman exhaled forcefully, directing her breath at Chester's face as if she meant to topple him with a blast of air from her lungs. Slapstick images flitted through Melhorn's mind, but any humor he might have experienced evaporated when Chester groaned again, trembling as if caught in a seizure. He crumpled to his knees and fell sideways, stiff as a board.

Heart attack, Melhorn guessed.

But Chester's face was blue, frozen in a startled rictus of pain. Ice crystals speckled his bushy gray eyebrows and sideburns, as if his body had been stored for weeks in an industrial freezer. The chill in the air intensified.

Melhorn's breath plumed in front of his face.

"What the hell . . . ?" he said.

She pounced on him, slender fingers darting out, clutching his throat like bony claws. Her smooth white face and ice-blue eyes were impossibly close. For a moment, he thought she was about to kiss him on the lips. Instead, she exhaled.

Melhorn shivered and couldn't stop shaking. The air became too frigid to breathe, felt like icicles stabbing his shriveled lungs. His vision dimmed and, belatedly, he thought to reach for his holstered weapon. But that was all. A desperate thought. No action. Limbs too heavy to move. Fingers frozen stiff.

Immobilized, mute and almost blind, he had one last flash of insight. Her hair—in the swirling snow! In the midst of the fierce winds, her long black hair had hung straight down, unnaturally motionless.

His thoughts took on impossible weight as lethargy tugged him down into rigid darkness, frozen oblivion. Too late he learned that the monsters of Windale were real.

* * * * *

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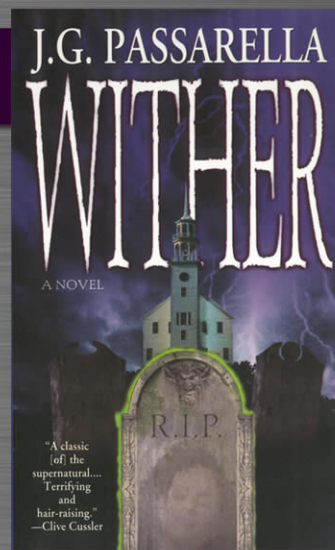
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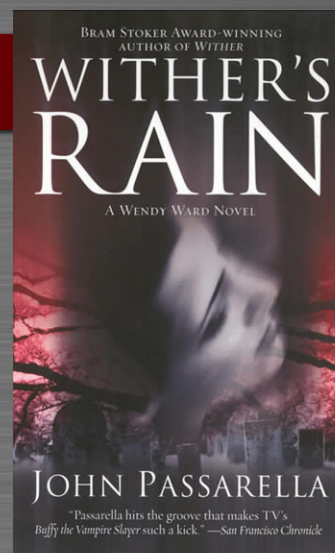
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