



Blackbird
Falls
Follies

DANIEL RITCHIE

Chapter One – Tootie Who?

Tootie wolf is a little confused today. She can barely remember a single detail of the past couple of weeks. She can tell you that she's been having nightmares about a giant bat and that she's been waking up in a pool of drool. And on the rare occasion when her mind does clear enough to remember something that only manifests in the form of a question, it's always an odd one: 'Mom, did you ever notice that sometimes in the morning when you look at me I've got a little mustache?' That's her life lately. A few days of clarity where she can recall a few things and then it's back to drooling.

In a rare moment when she's lucid, Tootie realizes that her mother, who has been acting very strange, is probably going to be having another one of her "I'm a wolf and I've been having a vision about a secret society of werewolves" type of freakouts.

Not that the two things are related, Tootie assures herself, but if you're going to have a vision about werewolves, and your pup has a little mustache when she wakes up in the morning, it's best to have some knowledge of the subject. So, for a few days, she reads everything she can find on the subject on the internet and even goes to her favorite librarian for a bit of info. The truth is out there, or at least werewolves are!

To be continued...

Chapter Two – Tootie Where?

The best thing about visiting the library, other than seeing Tooties favorite librarian, was that she had a lot of time to look around and get to know the place. She had even taken the liberty of making the rounds and reading each of the books in all the sections, though she said that she didn't have much luck with the science fiction section. So she settled down in the children's section for some well-deserved werewolf-free distraction.

She was leafing through a book she'd read over many times when drool began to drip from her mouth onto the library floor. She then suddenly heard the sound of footsteps coming down the hall. A bit startled by the intrusion she hastily grabbed a nearby book to use as a weapon.

The door to the children's section opened and Hooty Hoot walked in, his tail a bit wagged by excitement.

"Hi!" Tooties said, trying to sound casual. Hooty sniffed the air, "Have I intruded upon your personal space?" he asked.

"Oh, you're not in my personal space, just my reading space." She said, not realizing how lame that statement sounded until Hooty's tail began to wag.

She blushed and looked down at the floor. "Actually, I didn't even notice you were in the room, you just seemed to appear out of nowhere. You're not...you're not one of those big... uh, never mind. What is it you're looking for?"

Well, I just have a quick question if you don't mind," Hooty said.

Tooties sighed, "I suppose. What is it?"

"Do you have any books about werewolves?"

Tooties gasped, "Why do you need a werewolf book?"

"I don't really know," Hooty admitted.

Tootie looked around quickly and put her paw on his shoulder. "What's going on? Did something happen to you?"

"No, why?"

"You sound funny."

"That's because... Can you keep a secret?"

"Yes, if you don't tell, I won't tell."

"Do you promise?"

"Wolfscout's honor." Tootie crossed her heart.

"It's like this," Hootie began. "For the last few weeks, I've been seeing some animals who look like us... except they're not, and then I've also been having this creepy feeling in my stomach, and when I wake up in the morning, I have a funny taste in my mouth, and some weird thoughts in my head. Then, tonight... well, it all happened."

Tooties sat down and leaned her ear toward him. "What happened?"

Hooty turned his head and whispered, "I'm afraid to tell you... I'm afraid I'll scare you away."

Can I trust you?"

"Yes."

"Then, I'm afraid to tell you..."

"I told you I won't tell!"

"It's about the werewolves."

"Did something really happen?"

"Yes," he whispered, "I'm afraid I'll scare you away."

Tootie crossed her heart, "I won't tell."

Hooty looked into her big brown eyes, and his throat swelled. "My minds getting scrambled and there's something coming out of my nose, but no one else seems to notice."

Tootie's eyebrows went up, "You mean... a mustache?"

Hooty nodded.

Tootie's cheeks inflated and a deep, raspy voice filled her throat. "Woof!" It was as though a wolf was speaking.

Hooty didn't know what to think of this. He stared at the little girl, and couldn't decide if this was a dream or if his head really was being scrambled.

Tootie's eyebrows furrowed. "Woof!"

Hooty suddenly felt an impossible need to do this too. He took a big breath and released a sharp bark that went, "Ruf!"

Well, it seems our heroes aren't observing the library quiet rule. What's going to happen next?

Stay tuned...

Chapter Three – Tootie Barks

After their little barking episode, Hootie and Tootie relocated to the woods behind the Pizza Hole where they had more privacy.

“Sometimes when you get this feeling that you’re dreaming or hallucinating, you just have to run through the forest and bark your head off,” Tootie said as she watched Hootie chase a squirrel.

“It’s the best way to get it out of your head, and let it wake you up,” Hootie said, “You just have to make sure that it’s a real, loud barking, not a soft mewling.”

Tootie nodded her head, she could still feel a strong urge to bark but couldn’t figure out why.

“Hooty,” Tooty said with a tone of worry as she looked up at the sky. “We really shouldn’t be doing this in the woods. Someone might hear us.”

Hooty was confused. “Someone might hear us? Are you saying you want someone to hear us?”

Tootie took a deep breath, and let out a long sigh. “You don’t understand, someone could get the wrong idea and get mad at us. That would be a bad thing. A very bad thing,” she added as her voice started to quiver. “You have to promise me you won’t tell anyone about this.”

“Well, I’m going to tell you a secret,” Hootie said, “I am a member of the Secret Society of barking wolves. We have our own bark code, and there is only one rule. The rule is: Keep the bark code secret,”

Tootie sat, confused. “The bark code? That sounds like a secret code,” she paused. “What does it mean? Who made it up?”

“I’ll tell you, but you have to keep it a secret,” Hootie said, “It was my dad who taught me the code. It’s really quite simple. All I have to do is bark three times. It will always work if I bark three times. Remember, when someone hears this bark code, they’ll come to our side and they’ll protect us from any bad monsters.”

Tootie thought it over for a moment, and when she saw that Hooty was serious, she nodded her head. “Okay, I promise,” she said and smiled. “Now, let’s talk about the other secret.”

Hootie thought for a moment. What secret could Tootie have?

Well, the plot, like Hootie’s secret was beginning to unfold. What happens next? My guess: It probably involves pizza. You’ll just have to wait to find out.

The wolf adventure is just beginning...

“Meat! I need meat!” Tootie repeated for the tenth time waiting for her eighteen meat pizzas to come out of the oven.

Hootie and Tootie made a dash for the Pizza Hole after hunger overtook them, throwing aside the menu in favor of a custom order of eighteen meats, hoping it wouldn't overload the pizza oven.

Hootie and Tootie were about to get a surprise when a customer suddenly appeared at the front counter. “What kind of meat does this place have?” the customer asked. This wolf seemed to be new in town, and he appeared to be in need of meat. The trio watched in amazement as he ordered an “all meat pie, ‘and don't bother cooking it’” and a couple of side orders of meat, and began to lay out a role of cash that could choke a wildebeest. Soon, the wait staff came with the customer's order, and he began tearing into it like it were nothing. The wolf thanks his waiter, tossed another roll of twenties, and left for another restaurant.

“I guess he wasn't satisfied,” Hootie said “How much did he order?”

“Twelve beef ribs and a side order of meat,” the waitress replied. “The wolf was in such a hurry, I just gave him all of it.”

“You mean the wolf ate all those ribs and meat?” Tootie asked in amazement.

“How rude!” Hootie cried. “The wolf could have given us that order, or you and I could have eaten those ribs and meat without a second thought!” The waitress just smiled and went about her business.

“Hootie, do you think the wolf was just a wolf?” Tootie asked. Before Hootie could answer, the door opened again, and in came none-other-than Tooties arch-nemesis and next-door neighbor Scratch.

“Hi, Hootie, Tootie,” he said.

“Shush!” Tootie said and hurried him to sit down with them in their dark and private little booth.

“What's with the wolf story?” Scratch asked, “And who's the other fellow with the hairy coat? Sounds like it's getting a little crowded around here.”

“Oh, Scratch,” Tootie said, “We haven't had much of a chance to talk to you lately, have we? I'll welcome even your company in a time like this!”

Scratch didn't offer any pleasantries and just sat and spoke in his pripy fashion, “I haven't seen you or your mother for months, ever since the wolf hunt. Something strange is happening. What's going on?”

Hootie shushed Scratch and told him to keep it on the down-low. “Tootie was about to tell a secret...”

Their conversation was cut off by the sound of the waitress's voice, “Here's yer coffee, sweetie, just the way you like it, with extra green beans...”

“I want meat!” Tootie snapped and accidentally spilled the coffee on the floor. “Sorry, dear, it'll be right out.” With this, the waitress disappeared into the kitchen with a loud ding of her silverware.

Scratch looked at Tootie, not at all wondering what sent her into such a mood. He felt it too. There was something in the air. “What's this about a secret?” He asked quietly.

“Have you seen this week's newspaper, Scratch?” Tootie asked. “Oh, you haven't. Oh my... we haven't... oh... oh, yes, here it is He picked up the newspaper and started to read. “...the town of

Blackbird Falls is now a no-go zone... because of the wolf's curse." Scratch listened intently to Hootie's recitation of the story and was aghast, and yet relieved. "It's all right," Scratch said. I think we all know something is a little off, we just don't know what. But, hey I'm sure it's just an over-enthusiastic reporter, getting some good PR, more than anything.

Tootie was a little hesitant to share her thoughts, but she knew that all eyes were now on her. She didn't quite know why and decided to test the waters to see how her companions would react. Something's happened to me. It's more than just the mustache. It's even more than chasing the squirrel. I can't quite put my paw on it. It's like everything around me is changing in ways that I don't understand. My tail is growing longer and furrrier. My ears are growing and I can't figure out how. But most strange of all is the impossible craving for..."

The waitress returned just then with a steaming pie filled with 18 kinds of meat and a basket of breadsticks. Hootie, Tootie, and Scratch caught a whiff of the concoction and all glared at each other and then at the waitress with jealous looks and hungry eyes. She took the queue and ran for her life back into the kitchen.

All Hooty, Tootie, and Scratch could do was raise a paw and make smacking sounds and say, "Pie, pie, pie!" and look each other in the eyes in wonder. When it was all gone, they sat in an astonished silence for a bit. Then Tootie looked at Scratch and said, "So, you feel it too, huh?"

"Yeah. I was talking to that squirrel on the porch just before I came in, and when I went to chase it, I knew I had an uncontrollable urge of some sort, but when I looked back, I was surprised to see that the squirrel was gone. But there was this fog..."

"Oh, come on, Scratch," Hootie interrupted. "You've got a little fog in your brain, a little of the same kind of fog that we have in our heads right now."

Tootie crumpled up the newspaper and threw it in a wastebasket by the door. She then gazed outside and said, "There it is now. Come on, you two, we've got to get to the bottom of this mystery."

Hooty and Scratch looked at each other for a moment, then they turned to Tootie.

Scratch said, "There's only one question, Tootie. Where do we start?"

Tootie looked around the dining room. "I don't know," she said, "but we're all here now, and we can do this together. Okay, there's one thing we know. This all started with a big bat, so that's where we'll start."

To be continued...

Chapter Four – The Dark Woods

Tootie had to get to the bottom of this. She found a pair of binoculars in her backpack, and she started scanning the forest. She needed to find a bat and not just any bat. There were four types of bats in the area, bats, big bats, really big bats, and giant bats. She had to find the giant bat that was responsible for her visions. “But where do we find it,” She wondered.

Hooty explained to her. “We will have to go into the deep woods, you know.” Tootie looked up at him, and she gave him a smile that said, “Why are you grinning at me? I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“A few years ago, a couple of local critters were taking shelter from a thunderstorm under a dead tree. A giant bat came out of the mist, circled around, and then landed on the tree. The kids called their parents. The parents came out of the woods and tried to shoo the bat away. The bat just took off into the woods. The parents found the kids about an hour later. Their fur had turned white with fear.” Tootie looked at him, and then she smiled. “Don’t freak out, Hooty. I don’t know how, but I have a feeling I’ll love exploring the deep woods. Just show me the way to go.”

She smiled at him and said, “Yup.”

Hooty took her to his favorite grove of aspen trees and they fell into a conversation. He told her about the birds and bugs that live there.

Scratch raised his paw and asked, “Is it a good time to talk about the wood-ticks?”

“Wood ticks,” Tootie asked. “What wood ticks?”

They heard a rustling, and they looked up to see some tiny creatures moving toward them. Hooty smiled and called out to them. “Hello, tiny fellows, what’s your name?”

A chorus of tiny voices responded, “Hi, we’re the little wood-ticks, what’s your name?”

Hooty gave a little chuckle and said, “Oh, just my little wood-ticks. Thank you for answering my question.”

“So glad to see you. You’re the first animals we’ve seen in the deep woods for many days. Come closer, won’t you?”

“There were others in the deep woods?” Tootie asked. “What happened to them?”

“We eat them.”

“Ate them? All of them? Really?”

“Well, not all of them at once. The big ones are much tastier than the little ones. We all come together and share the big ones. It’s a feast. We get bigger every time. You’d love it, too, if you let us.”

“Sure,” Hooty said, “we’d love it.”

Tootie put her paw over his mouth and shushed him. “No, Hootie. We’re trying not to get eaten, remember?”

Just then, when the wood-ticks were getting restless, they heard something in the distance. It sounded like the rustling of leaves or the snapping of branches underfoot. They had never heard such a noise before. It was getting closer, too.

“That sound—it’s getting closer,” Tootie said. “We must hide!”

“It won’t do any good. It’s coming this way!” Hootie said. He was right. In another moment, they heard something crashing through the woods right ahead of them. It was bigger than the entire swarm of wood-ticks.

“Bigger than the wood-ticks, too,” Hootie said. “It’s a bear! Run, Tootie, run!” Hootie cried.

“I can’t run, Hootie. I’m too scared!”

But it wasn’t a bear at all. It was a giant wood-tick-eating bat! And Hootie saw that it had the most awful green-yellow eyes. It was more than a foot long.

The tick-bat leaped at Hootie and sunk its teeth into his paw. Tootie screamed.

“S-s-s-sh!” Hootie begged her. “It’s one of those tick-bats. It’s not a monster. It’s just an ordinary tick-bat!”

Tootie had heard of the tick-bats. She did not want one biting her best friend. She ran over to Hootie’s side and pulled his paw away from the tick-bat’s teeth.

“It’s not a monster,” Hootie told Tooty. “It’s only an ordinary tick-bat, just a harmless little creature. It’s not as big as all that.”

“That’s right,” Scratch said. “Only a harmless little tick-bat.”

Tootie turned to the bat.

“No, wait!” she cried. “You needn’t bite my friends. That’s exactly what a monster would do!” The tick-bat looked confused. Then it flew straight back into the woods.

“You’re not the monster tick-bat. I am,” Tootie said.

Hootie’s leg was now so sore and swollen it hurt to walk.

“Wait for me, Hootie,” Tootie said. “I’m going to find the tick-bat.” Tootie then ran into the deep, dark woods by herself, wondering if the bat was waiting for her.

To be continued...

Chapter Five – The Tick Bat

Tootie walked nervously toward the cave. This was it, the tick-bat's lair. She felt if she stopped, it would bite her. So she went on, trying to listen for a sound to warn her, but there was only the stillness of the night, the breeze in the pines, and the whisper of the small animal who lived in the forest. There was a dim twinkle of the half-moon.

She suddenly felt a wave of confusion wash over her, like she had experienced for the last several weeks. She felt her vision waver and wind into the dim. With effort, she tried to focus on the cave and keep her feet in the ground. She stopped, bent over, and felt salivary glands in her mouth churning in fear. She felt something wet on her paw. She reached up with it and touched her nose. She felt drool. She stood up straight and wiped her paw across her face, rubbing away the drool.

She was about to fade away completely into the night when a familiar voice called out, "Tootie?" It was the voice of her Daddy calling to his daughter. She felt the need to wag her tail in acknowledgment. She felt his paw touch her and then his voice calling again. "It's alright." His paws held her and gently petted her, "Don't worry Tootie. It's OK."

But this creature she only barely was aware of wasn't her Daddy. This creature was gently nibbling on her leg. No, it wasn't nibbling on her leg. There was something on her leg, and the creature was gently chewing it off. She could not fight it, only react to it. It wasn't painful. It was sweet, soothing, and felt much better for it.

Then, after some unknown amount of time, Hootie and Scratch came calling for her. Her head began to clear, and she wiped her chin again. The creature, whatever it was, was gone.

"Where are you, Hootie?" Hootie called. His voice was raspy but strong. Tooty was starting to feel like she was back on solid ground again, but there was still something lingering in her. She couldn't quite place it. Then, out of the darkness, she heard her Daddy calling to her. It was her real Daddy, and she jumped in excitement to hear his voice

She stumbled and finally found a firm footing again, and with a new set of emotions, she ran to his voice.

Tonight had been a scary night, but she knew her Daddy was always there for her. And now, with Hootie and Scratch at her side, she thought, just maybe, she could deal with whatever was happening in Blackbird Falls.

To be continued...

Chapter Six – The Wolf Ring

It was a dark and stormy night when the wolf kids all gathered together with their weapons at the ready in the deep woods. They stood in a circle of torches, ready for battle. Tootie had a book from the library that she could use as a sword, and Scratch had a set of claws that could open a tin can if the tin can were made of butter. At least Hootie had a long nose for smelling the battle, and a tail that could smack.

Every now and then one would turn to the other and a spark of heat lightning would shoot across the sky followed by a deep rumbling growl. And a little voice would call, “Is it time?” The entire circle would then fall silent for a moment.

“It is time we consulted an expert” The Chief of the Wolf Kids (Tootie’s Daddy) barked.

“You mean a werewolf expert?” Scratch said with a cocked eyebrow.

“I mean a doctor,” the Chief said, “For Hootie’s swollen leg.”

“A werewolf doctor?” Hootie then chimed in. The Chief didn’t give him an answer as he pointed to a lonely hilltop with a stone building on top. The only doctor anywhere near here is up there, on the hill beyond Danger Valley (bum, bum, bum!)

Hootie, Scratch, and Tootie hopped along at the Chief’s side as they started toward the hill. The group had just crossed a little creek when the Chief said,

“Hootie’s leg is getting worse. We better hurry before it’s too late.”

Tootie then held her daddy’s paw and tugged. Then her little voice called out. “Thank you for coming, Daddy.”

“I heard three barks, and so I dropped everything and came running.” Tootie’s Daddy said.

“You know the secret code of the bark club?” Tootie asked with glassy eyes.

“It’s no secret that I’ll always come running when you need me, sweetie. Now, I don’t want you to cry anymore.”

“I don’t even remember barking” Tootie mumbled as she stumbled on her own hurt leg.

“Are you alright, sugar? Did you get bit too? What’s wrong, baby?” Tootie’s Daddy asked.

“It hurts so bad I just want to quit.” Tootie cried.

Tootie’s daddy picked her up and put her on his shoulder.

“You can’t quit, baby. You’re my number one.”

They all then hurriedly began to climb the winding dirt road. But when they made it to the top of the hill, they saw there was a house attached to the stone building, and the dirt road was just a winding dirt road that went nowhere. Hootie turned to Tootie and said, “This is so weird, but I think we’re going to ghost but that’s OK.”

The three sat down on a big rock that was close to the edge of the house and said their prayers. While they said their prayers, Tootie prayed the biggest and most beautiful prayer that she had ever prayed.

“Dear Lord, I ask that you help me be brave like Hootie and like Daddy. He has to carry me because I can’t even walk.”

Then they ventured to the door where they saw a plaque that read “W. Wolf MD.”

“Well, that sounds like a werewolf name to me!” Hootie said.

“Yes it does,” Tootie said, “But I still want to know what’s wrong with us.”

Dr. Wolf then walked out from around a big old tree that was beside his house. His teeth were white as snow, and his mouth was smiley. He was wearing white pants and a button-up shirt. His paws were large and strong, and he was wearing a green knit cap. He came to the edge of the tree and waved to Tootie and Hootie. He said, “Wooow I see three beautiful wolf pups here. But aren’t you a bit old for my practice, or are you in trouble?”

Tootie said, “Yes sir we sure are. But I want to know what’s wrong with Hooty and me. Can you help us?”

“I’ll be the best doctor you ever had. My name is Wolf. I am a real, real doctor. I specialize in the study of wolves, like your pups,” Dr. Wolf said, and he bowed his head at Tootie and Hootie. And I specialize in the study of all sorts of animals, so let me take a look at your pups,” he said, and he bent over them and took a big long sniff.

Then he looked at Tootie and said, “Are you OK?”

“I’m Tootie,” Tootie said, and she smiled up at Dr. Wolf, “Thanks for asking, Dr. Wolf. This is my first time with an animal doctor.”

“OK then,” Dr. Wolf said, and he took a long look at Hootie, “Are you experiencing confusion?” “Yes sir,” Hootie said, “But what’s wrong with me?”

“Your pups seem to have two heads,” Dr. Wolf said.

“Two heads?” Tootie said, “Two heads? What do you mean?”

“Maye I should get my other pair of glasses so I can see?” Dr. Wolf said, “Maye this is the problem. Why don’t you come along inside with me and get out of the cold weather,” and he smiled at Tootie and Hootie, and he took them by the paw and followed them into his spooky old house. And on the way, he looked at them and he said, “I’ll get those heads off of you in no time at all,” and he laughed and he said, “You’ll never be the same, and don’t worry, you can put ‘em back on later if you like. Come on in.”

To be continued...

Note: It was a DARK and stormy night, not a DORK and stormy night.

Chapter Seven – The Doctor

Upon entering the mansion the group was taken to a room, which Dr. Wolf had filled with books and old furniture, on the far side of which stood a huge antique wardrobe with two doors, and Dr. Wolf took out a head from the wardrobe and gave it to Tootie to hold.

Dr. Wolf asked, “How do you like it?”

“I love it,” Tootie said. “I really do. It’s just not the same as my old one. Didn’t you say you were going to find your glasses if I can be so bold as to ask?”

Dr. Wolf laughed and said, “Of course, and you can keep that. These things aren’t hard to get. They just fell off and I pick them up. I mean I didn’t want it to go to waste. You’re never too young to have one of your own.”

Then, when the doctor had his glasses in hand and had returned to his seat on the ottoman. He saw Hooty staring at him and with a startle, said, “Oh my, the patient is worse than I thought. I should have done my homework. It’s too late now!”

“Too late! What do you mean, it’s too late?” Tootie asked.

“Look at these sunken eyes, Tootie,” the doctor said, placing his gloved hands on Hooty’s head, “The glazed expression, the sagging cheeks, the drooling mouth...”

“But that’s his regular expression, Doctor,” Tootie tried to explain. “He always has an expression like that. He was born with it.”

“Oh, I see. That changes everything, the doctor said. “I didn’t know that. I need to do a differential diagnosis. I need to know what to treat first. And there is no doubt. It’s obvious to me...”

“Is he a werewolf? That’s what we really want to know!” “No! No. This is not a werewolf. This is not a lycanthropic condition. Take a look at this bite on the leg, the swelling and scabbing, this is not wolfish.” Tootie frowned as the memories of the last few hours in the deep woods came flooding back to her.

That is where the giant bat bit him. It came out of the deep woods and attacked us.” The doctor stood up and picked up his bag, ready to leave. “Well, time to call in the authorities. I guess we have no choice, we have to report this.” “What is it, Doc?” Tootie’s Dad tried to ask as the doctor spun around in confusion, looking for something.

“I’ve seen this type of case before. You see, your pups are greatly mistaken about the nature of the bite. This is not the bite of any bat, even a giant bat. This is the bite of the rare vampire wood tick.”

Tootie’s father stood up, he was clearly confused, and Tootie shook her head in refusal to believe what the doctor was saying. “We saw the bat come out of the woods and latch onto Hooty’s leg with its teeth.”

“Tootie’s right, Doc, we saw the bat,” Scratch interjected.

“No, no, no, no. This is an absolutely incredible, rare case of a vampire wood tick. It has been scientifically proven to have a bite just like the bite on this young wolf’s leg. Look at the symptoms! It is clear that they have been experiencing loss of memory, confusion, and sudden drooling fits. They must have been bitten by this tick, but they do not remember what happened.

Tootie spoke up again. “I remember something attaching itself to my leg, but I can’t remember

how, or what it was, but I wasn't really afraid at the time because I didn't know what was happening to me. I just remember that I was really sleepy, like the sleepiness you get when you haven't eaten all day, and kind of relaxed."

"Don't you see?" said the doctor. "That's exactly my research! I have studied a great deal on vampire-tick. What you have experienced is the bite of this little beast, and it was the giant bat that came to feed on the tick! Think of it like this. The giant bat uses a sonic blast to hypnotize the host into a stupor, and then, before his senses are awake and functioning, it sucks off of the parasite. Once this is complete, the bat burrows back into its hiding place until it is disturbed again. It is just like what you have been experiencing."

All three of the pups now were sitting upright in their chairs as though in a daze, with their eyes wide open and glazed.

Doctor Wolf asked the question, "Do you understand what I have been telling you?" Tootie ventured to answer, "You mean that the giant bat is actually beneficial, and all our strange symptoms were caused by the vampire tick bites?" Doctor Wolf looked at Tootie and smiled, "That is exactly what I mean, young lady! In reality, there are no vampires, but they use vampires as their names. We know now that it was the giant bat that was responsible for your memory lapse, but the rest, the confusion and so on, was due to the ticks. Now, as I have already said, I must warn the authorities. The vampire wood ticks are very dangerous, and if not controlled by the local giant tick-eating bats, they could multiply and start an infestation that could wipe out the entire town of Blackbird Falls.

The doctor turned to his ancient computer to log on to the internet. What is a wolf computer like? If you can remember the by-gone age of ticker r-tape, when a computer mouse did not exist and computer keyboards were huge flat paddles, well, it's nothing like that. It's mostly made of old tin cans and string and pieces of the vacuum cleaner.

Doctor wolf's face turned pale when he read the news on his screen. The local inhabitants of Blackbird Falls have all turned into zombies! The local authorities in Blackbird Falls were in a full panic and were on the lookout for giant bats. They had heard stories of the giant bats (what they called in the newspapers, the "wolf's curse") and thought that they might have been responsible for the infestation.

"It's too late," the Doctor moaned. "The ticks are multiplying and infecting the locals." Tootie stated, "You mean to tell me that they are hunting the bats, instead of the vampire ticks?" Doctor Wolf nodded his head as he answered, "Yes, in all probability, that is what is happening." Tootie looked at Doctor Wolf with wide eyes, "That's crazy!" "Tell that to the bats," Doctor Wolf replied as he looked at Tootie.

To be continued...

Chapter Eight – Tootie to the Rescue

“I don’t believe this is happening,” Tootie muttered to herself, the Doctor’s stone building on top of Danger Hill now a silhouette on the distant hillside. The Doctor’s horse-drawn buggy charged over the bumpy pavement, heading back to Blackbird Falls. The woods surrounding Blackbird Falls was filled with zombie villagers, and they were on a rampage to find the Giant Tic Bat that lived in the deep woods.

“Oh, Doctor, how in the world can we stop this?” Tootie begged. “It is too late for that,” the Doctor replied.

“No,” Tootie’s Dad said calmly. “There is one thing that we can do.” “What’s that?” the Doctor asked as he looked up at Tootie’s Dad. “Yeah, Mr. Tootie’s Dad,” Scratch added. “Do we enact a law?” “Or send an angry meme?” Hootie suggested.

“No,” Dad answered. “I think we should talk to them.” “That is crazy!” the Doctor exclaimed. “So crazy, it might be our best chance at survival! And the chance of a lifetime for Tootie to prove herself as an amazing warrior!” The Doctor continued to argue with Tootie’s Dad, but Dad remained steadfast in his plan, and Tootie and her friends agreed. The Doctor and the teens rode towards the crowd of zombie villagers, converging in the one place that would bring them all together in the same place, Danger Bridge.

“Hey, you zombie, get away from that bat!” the Doctor yelled. His horse reared and nearly ran out of control. The horses finally stopped a safe distance away from the crowd and waited for the zombies to scatter. The zombie townspeople all had torches and pitchforks.

“They won’t listen, will they?” Tootie asked.

“Yeah,” the Doctor answered, “they are stubborn, that’s for sure. But there’s no way we can let them destroy the Giant Tic Bat. Tootie, you have to convince them we’re their only hope!”

“That’s stupid,” Tootie cried. “They’re not going to believe me!” Then she turned to her Daddy. “I’m scared. “Don’t let them hurt me,” she pleaded. “Don’t worry, I’ll hold your paw the whole time. I’ll always be right beside you.”

So Tootie gulped and Her voice was soft. She could barely squeak. “Hey, you zombies,” she tried to yell, “Please don’t hurt me. I’m not a monster. I’m just a girl. I’ll let you tie me up if you like. Just don’t hurt the Giant Tic Bat! He’s not a monster either! He’s just a funny-looking rodent with wings and a funny nose. He’s not going to hurt anybody.”

“But the Tic Bat is a real monster,” one of the zombies said. “He’s a monster, just like us.” “Not at all,” Tootie responded. “He looks a little funny, that’s all. Don’t you see, he’s so small you’d never even know he was alive. But I’ll tell you about him. This little black tick, it’s the only thing he can eat. You’ll never see him eating anything else. And when he’s full, he goes away. Then he sleeps for a while and goes back to eating.”

“That’s not what we read in the papers. How did you come to this strange and fantastic conclusion?” the zombie asked.

“Because I too was bitten by the Vampire Wood Tick, and I saw what it did to my friends. But I’m ok now. And my friends are ok too. We’re just getting over the confusion and drooling spells. That’s why we should be friends with the Tic Bat, to make us well again.”

Some of the zombies were beginning to smile. “It makes perfect sense,” one of them said.

“We’ll be friends with the Tic Bat if he can help us be well again.” But other zombies who were more cautious than amused continued to ask questions, and Tootie gave the same answer as before,

“He’s the kindest Giant Tic Bat I know.”

Some of the zombies believed her, and some didn’t. Some of the more frustrated zombies turned around and decided to loot Blackbird Falls of all its moon pies and other tasty treats, while others turned to head home.

Tootie stood in wonder and frustration of her own and asked her Daddy, “Why couldn’t I convince them all?”

Eventually, the animals in town got over the confusion and drooling spells. They began to get over the fact that they were afraid of the Giant Tic bat and instead developed the kind of friendships that were not at all frightening.

The animals that remained zombies, on the other hand, became even more hateful. Each time one of the creatures was bitten by a Vampire Wood Tick, they became even more vicious and turned on their friends, neighbors, and family for no good reason.

One day in town, Tootie sat with her Daddy and friends Hootie and Scratch at the Pizza Hole. They mused over their recent adventure in anticipation of the world’s second-largest eighteen meat pie.

“I wonder why nobody could agree about the bat?” Tootie said to her Daddy as she ran her little paw through the fur of her ruff.

“Well, I guess there were some things that animals are too afraid to think about. And besides that, everybody had a different opinion about what was the real problem.”

At this time, the waitress arrived with the pie, and they all took a big slice. Hootie, who at that moment was biting into his pie, added, “But after all that stuff, I don’t even care if there is a real problem or not. I just like to eat!”

Tootie still pondered, “But why can’t everyone agree? Why do they take sides?” “Honey, think of it like this. We all have sides. One side is thoughtful. The other is creative. One side brushes hair, and the other side crams pizza into your mouth.” Tootie laughed at this. “Also, it’s as simple as this. Think about walking down the sidewalk. Your two sides are constantly at war for balance, but both work together in harmony to move you forward. It’s only when one side tries to dominate the other that things go wrong.”

“You’re so smart, Daddy, and so funny! I never saw it before.” “My daughter is the genius who stopped the zombie invasion. I’m just the clown.” The children laughed together and enjoyed their meat pie.

“Well,” Tootie finally decided, “there’s a lot to think about, right? We now understand the memory loss and drooling spells, and images of the bat. But there are some unanswered questions. I mean, why the incredible desire to bark and chase squirrels? Why the impossible hunger for meat, meat, and more meat? Why oh why?”

“Ah, Hon. My little girl is growing up. Your body is changing and maturing. You’re going to feel things...”

“Daddy! Not in front of my friends!”

“Ok, Hon. You’re going to want to understand what’s happening to you. We’ve gone so far and gotten so much already, Tootie. And we have much further to go, but know this. I’m always with you.”

“Ah, Daddy, I wish that you could see how much I love you.” Dad was about to say something sentimental but thought better of it and instead took her hand, and that was enough.

“Oh, but wait,” Tootie suddenly blurted out, “Does this mean I’m going to grow a full mustache?” Her friends then laughed and decided, “It looks like you’ll be going to the groomers again, Tootie,” and they finished their pie and coffee and got up from the table. Scratch took Tootie aside for a moment. “I guess I’m heading home now. Do you know? We’ve been through two whole stories now, and we haven’t had a chance to do our whole “nemesis” shtick yet...”

“Yes,” Tootie agreed, “But to quote Luna the Moon, ‘There’s always tomorrow’.”

“I’ll come by your place tomorrow,” he said, “and see what we can do about it.” Tootie nodded, and Scratch walked out of the Pizza Hole. Tootie didn’t want to go home just yet. “Daddy,” she said then, “do you think we could order another pie. I’m still a little hungry.” Dad smiled. “Good idea, Tootie. You’ve been talking so much. I can’t think of anything better to do.”

So they walked back to their table in the Pizza Hole and ordered another pie, and the three of them, Daddy, Tootie, and Hooty, smiled as they ate it.

THE END